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CHRISTIAN COURIER

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"This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
Luke 2:12

Christmas Issue highlights

This same Jesus will come again p.6

The Gift of Grace.....p.10

The Sign.....p.14

God's Wink.....p.15

Angel Interviews.....p.16

Looking for God in a strange land.....p.18

The birth of Christ the Lord and life in the Kingdom p.24

Greetings

We, the staff and board of Christian Courier, wish all of our readers all the blessings of peace – reconciliation with god and with one another – this season and throughout the coming year.

To express our greetings, we share with you Christmas poems written by two CC contributors – Linda Siebenga and Theresa Miedema.

Staff:

Harry DerNederlanden
Rose DerNederlanden
Ineke Medcalf-Strayer

Board:

Gary Van Eyk
Emma Winter
Sylvan Gerritsma
Nelly Westerhoff

Cow Dung and a Waft of Myrrh

grasping for elements of the divine
we find them blended with the earthy

barn dust and the breath of a Savior on our faces
the pungent smell of cow dung and a waft of myrrh
sheep voices and the music of angelsstars telling stories
while feet are settled on muck

this world wrapped in strong clinging hope
God packaged in a mortal infant's body

watch a grandson's curly blond head thrust
into the cardboard stable
to find the cow behind the manger
as shepherds and wisemen scatter and drop
beneath the tinsel and shining
of a decked tree

if we see Him there
even a glimpse
radiating against the cold
winter of our dormant souls
there is a stir of life

Linda Siebenga

Christmas Sonnet

This is how God showd his amazing love:
When fellowship of God and man was broken,
After the curse invitd judgement from above,
In place of death, God's final Word was spoken.

The Word! Almighty God, perfect in Grace!
The Son of God elects to leave His throne.
Eternal God, now bound by time and space,
Most High God dons human form as his own!

T'is mystery beyond comprehension
Angels marvel, they fete the sacred birth
This grace beyond human apprehension --
Imagine! God above comes to live on earth!

O people, lose not your wonder! For could anything
be stranger:
The Lion of Judah lies sleeping quietly in a manger!

Theresa Miedema

REMBRANDT van Rijn, The Nativity

Meditation

From the cradle of civilization to the cradle of Bethlehem

Harry der Nederlanden

Once again the serene strains of "Silent night" and the proclamation of "Peace on earth" comes to a world steeped in war, violence, suffering and shrill political divisions. Our eyes turn to the East, to the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates, the birthplace of civilization, and the probable home of the wise men who saw the star and followed it to Bethlehem.

At the center of this area lies Baghdad, the place where all the political wisdom in the world seems unable to bring peace. When the present-day magi of the East look up and see a bright light in the sky, they duck and scramble for cover. It is probably artillery fire or a missile seeking its target. The millennialist evangelicals are right: the geopolitical events of today are part of the biblical story, and many of them are evoked in the opening scenes of the New Testament. But interpreting the nature of those connections between the present turmoil and that birth 2000 years ago requires great wisdom, greater wisdom, it seems, than we can muster.

The birth of God's only begotten Son, his self-revelation in the Word-made-flesh, is deliberately framed in terms of the geopolitics of Old Testament history. The wise men or magi come from the area of the fertile crescent, which is not just the cradle of civilization but which is also where Scripture locates Paradise – the beginning of the seed of Adam. Later, the civilizations that flourished there and became powerful – Babylon and Assyria – invaded Israel and carried off most of the people of God into exile.

Egypt also comes into the picture, as Joseph and Mary seek refuge from Herod in the land of bondage. Abraham, who hailed from Ur (probably located in the fertile crescent), sought refuge there too. In the days of Joseph, of course, when drought killed the crops in Bethlehem, house of bread, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt in search of grain.

The Christmas story becomes a crossroads of Old Testament geopolitics. The nations are also characters in the Christmas story.

What was it in the lore of these magi from the east that caused them to fixate on that star and to associate it with Palestine? Perhaps the fame of the prophet Daniel and his prophecies lived on in the country of Nebuchadnezzar, speculated Klaas Schilder in a masterful Christmas sermon. Or perhaps remnants of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah were picked up by the syncretistic religions that flourished in the area. They tended to absorb bits from many sources. Large numbers of captives from Israel lived among these heathen peoples for many years, and not all of the exiles returned.

So perhaps the peculiar star that appeared in the heavens accorded with some fragment of the gospel that had found its way into the arcane learning of these astrologers. Whatever spurred their quest, humanly speaking, we may be sure that they had only a vague, inchoate notion of the star's meaning.

God's self-revelation, a revelation of his love, may be enough to arouse our longings, says Schilder, but although they lure us to the wonders of that divine love, they are not enough to reveal to us the source of that allure.

In fact, if there was a peculiar star or alignment of the planets that lured them to Bethlehem, you wonder why more wise men from other parts of the Mediterranean didn't come hurrying to the stall and the manger. Something more than the unique brilliance of that star stirred them to action, got them packing their camels and selecting their special gifts.

Nevertheless, as we lament the commercialization of Christmas, sure that the true meaning of the holiday is being completely obscured by consumerism and cheap sentiment, the story of the wise men gives grounds for hope. However distorted, fragmented and debased the good news of the Messiah may be in the contemporary Christmas scene, perhaps here and there someone's deepest religious longings are stirred enough to seek the real meaning of that star that twinkles so brightly. But this applies not just to our Christmas celebrations; it applies to the sum total of the ways we have wrapped the gospel up in our own culture and to the ways hope springs up in the human breast.

We know, of course, that beneath the human motivations, what goaded the wise men on their journey was God himself. He is Lord of history, and ultimately it is he who brings these heathen astrologers into the story of Christ's birth.

He did not do it to telegraph the message that other religions, too, can bring us to the truth. Neither their astrological learning nor the star are enough to bring the wise men to Bethlehem, Schilder points out. They lose their way and have to stop in Jerusalem. No one there seems to have noticed the star. And even the information from the writings of the prophets about the Messiah's birth seems to have become forgotten or buried. Herod has to assemble a convention of Jewish biblical scholars, who put their heads together, sift through the scrolls of God's self-revelation to Israel and finally come up with a name – Bethlehem.

You'd think that the arrival of that caravan of rich magi – "kings" – from the east would have cause quite a stir in Jerusalem and that the story of the birth of a Jewish king in Bethlehem would have quickly circulated. There are no reports of visitors from Jerusalem arriving at the house in Bethlehem. Was there no kindling of curiosity and desire among the Jews themselves? Or did everything happen so fast that Joseph and Mary were on the road to Egypt before anyone could react?

If the arousal of the wise men on the basis of only a glimmering of the gospel gives us hope, the dullness and inactivity of those entrusted with God's revelation gives us pause. There is irony and judgment in this episode as well as hope. There is hope because God revealed something of himself even in the superstitious wisdom of the astrologers; but there is judgment in that the wisdom of Israel's Bible scholars was blind to the riches under their very noses.

Ironically, among Israel's upper crust, it is only Herod who acts on the words from Micah, and his is the action of a man clinging fearfully to his power and privilege. Just in case the prophecy is true, he sends his soldiers to slaughter all the babies born in Bethlehem and vicinity.

Like the teachers of the law, we, too, often sit with our noses buried so deep in Scripture that we don't get to Bethlehem. If our hermeneutics and exegesis, our theology and biblical ethics do not lead us to humble ourselves and bow down before the Christ-child, they are sterile exercises, mere diversions, designed only to demonstrate our own learning and wisdom.

Having been lured by the star and guided by Micah's prophecy dug up by the keepers of the tradition, the wise men at last arrive at Bethlehem – and the stall, the lowly stall. Actually, according to the Bible by this time Joseph and Mary are living in a house, but there was undoubtedly nothing remarkable about the house to distinguish it from those of ordinary working people of the time.

Why, at that point, didn't these wealthy, high ranking men from the east turn their camels around and declare their journey a failure, a bit of folly? Surely they did not set out expecting to arrive at a simple, ordinary house! They stopped in Jerusalem because they expected to find the newborn king to be born to high-ranking people, to be of royal lineage. They came expecting to pay homage to royalty, to see with their own eyes the birth of a hero or a demigod. Even Jesus' own disciples after following him, hearing his words and seeing his miracles, still were not able to understand all the signs that pointed to him until Jesus himself explained it to them after his resurrection. The wise men did not have such a teacher.

Yet, the Bible tells us that when they arrived at the humble lodgings of Joseph and Mary, they bowed down and worshiped the child. Through the ages Christian painters have shown the magi or kings kneeling beside the manger in the stall – perhaps not literally true but symbolically appropriate. The contrast between the power, wealth and status of the visitors and the humble condition of the God-child convey the thrust of the biblical message. Some painters depict the scene of the adoration of the magi as taking place not in a barn or cave but in a ruined temple, church or castle. The edifices of human power and culture did not recognize him and they will one day crumble. They are incapable of housing him or providing for him a platform for his rule. The ruins pick up the theme of the Song of Mary: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."

Some would stop here and see in the incarnation only a simple affirmation of our fleshly, frail, naked humanity stripped of all the trappings of power, authority and culture. Certainly, there is a strong No here to the power of the nations, as there is throughout the Old Testament as well. But the magi or kings come bearing gifts, rich gifts that represent the wealth of their cultures. The gifts are a down-payment on Isaiah's prophetic vision of the kingdom of God in which the kings of the nations bring the wealth of their nations as tribute to Jerusalem.

The No here is to the same temptation that Jesus says No to in his temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. It is the temptation to build on some other foundation than our humble acknowledgement of the kingship of this Jesus. The No is to every attempt to lay claim to this world and our calling to be co-regents and co-gerents with him that does not pass through the cross.

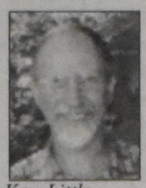
His is a kind and gentle rule, not one that obliterates our humanity or strips it of its dignity and culture. It does not co-opt and crush our humanity, but makes room for it, encourages and sustains it, for he is not our competitor in doing good works but prepares them for us to do. He glories in all that we build on the foundation of faith in him and promises to bless it.

This does have political ramifications, as Van Ruler suggests (p.24), although it begins by laying claim to our hearts. It means that we too must not use our power to ride rough-shod over others and obliterate their independent, unique personhood. Before the birth of Jesus, there was a period in which God seemed to withdraw – at least his direct intervention in the affairs of Israel. And after Jesus' ascension the same thing happens, as Torrance points out (p.6). As we await his second coming, just as Israel awaited his first coming, God creates, as it were, a special opportunity for the seed of his Word to take root in our hearts and to blossom from within. It is a distancing that is an expression of love, a love that courts a response of love from us. God comes to us in his Son Jesus not to make slaves of us but to adopt us as his sons and daughters. And then he kindles deep inside our hearts a great desire, dreams and visions of a world transformed by the power of his Word and his Grace.

News

Toronto City Mission

Sonya VanderVeen Feddema


Ken Little

Poverty is much more than a lack of food, clothing, or shelter according to Ken Little, Executive Director of the Toronto City Mission (TCM). A member of Spring Garden Church in North York, Little has spent his life sharing God's love with poor and marginalized people.

Established in November 1879 by ministers and laymen, TCM is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. Its original mandate was to care for destitute children and adults through providing food, clothing, evangelism, and the opportunity to attend a camp outside the city in the summer. However, in 1999 the organization reevaluated its mandate because it pinpointed a gap in the work of poverty relief in Toronto.

"The process of looking at the needs of the city was part of a strategic planning process," Little, 54, explains. "It was based on my own research into poverty in the city – looking at the history of TCM and then observing the strengths of other Christian ministries in the city. Street need is evident and there are many agencies seeking to address it. However, the needs of children and families is much more hidden, especially the culture of poverty that catches many families."

Little believes that society needs to develop a holistic understanding of poverty, something that TCM is striving to incorporate into its approach and programs. "People can be impoverished through a lack of hope, poor family relationships and life skills, or be spiritually poor, just to name a few," he explains. "In working with the poor many see the provision of food, clothing, and shelter as an answer. However, by understanding poverty from a holistic view, it is not the relief of poverty that we are seeking but rather transformation out of poverty. There is an on-going need for immediate assistance, however the great need of working toward transformation of children, families, and their communities is the path TCM has chosen. In a sense we are now a niche mission."

TCM has been revitalized by sharpening its focus, Little says, as well as by taking its ministry out of its downtown office site on 608 Spadina Street to the neighborhoods in which the families it serves live. It has placed two community missionaries in three targeted communities – Malvern, St. Jamestown, and Willowtree. Not only do the missionaries work in these communities, but they also reside there, allowing them to develop trusting relationships with the children and families.

The Malvern community, located in Scarborough, has one of the highest rates of single parent families living below the low-income cut-off line (according to TCMs website www.torontocitymission.com/). Because subsidized housing is not readily available, many single parents work two part-time jobs to pay rent and housing costs. Therefore, many children have no adult supervision after school, which puts them at risk of becoming involved in detrimental activities.

The St. Jamestown community represents the highest density of people in all of Canada living in one area. Forty-three percent of families in this area live below the poverty line and 31 percent are single parent families. As well, many of the community's residents are new immigrants.

The Willowtree community is a low-income apartment and townhouse complex in the Willowdale community and is subsidized by the municipality. What sets it apart from other community housing projects is its proximity to the affluence of Willowdale. Consequently, Willowtree's children witness lifestyles that are out of reach for their families, creating desires that parents can't fulfill.

In each community TCM attempts to break the cycle of poverty through its dynamic programs which include a children's choir, tutoring and academic support, computer programs, after school programs, March break and summer day camps, and women's support programs, to name a few.

TCM's inner city missionaries face joys and challenges. Naomi Van De Visch, who works in the Willowtree community, says her job is particularly gratifying when a young person with little self-confidence takes a small step forward, for example, by doing something as seemingly simple as ordering food at a restaurant, or by finding employment. She also appreciates the fact that she recognizes by name almost everyone she meets in the Willowtree community. However, she says, "My greatest joy is when children and youth come to a fuller understanding or a deeper relationship with God."

But she also faces challenges. Particularly difficult are penetrating walls that kids erect around their hearts, watching children and young people who have taken one step forward take ten steps backwards, and seeing people who have received Christ face a hard uphill climb to full health.

Dawn Bailey-Elbourne, an inner city missionary in the Malvern community particularly enjoys directing TCM's Children's Choir – made up of children in grades 1-8 – which, she says, touches people's lives with "the message of hope and joy through Jesus."

When Dawn reflects on TCM's positive impact on its participants, Sadio, a teenaged girl she met two years ago, comes to mind. Dawn immediately saw Sadio's potential and God-given leadership abilities. Since that time she has been a leader in training for TCM's summer camp program. On TCM's awards evenings she was recognized for her leadership abilities. Dawn says, "The other kids could be resentful of her, but this is not the case. She's not proud or boastful, but a friend to all."

Little points out that, besides taking its ministry to needy families, TCM has been revitalized because of a commitment to growth on the part of its Board. As a result the mission has acquired more staff, more partnerships, and a broader support base. "We have seen positive outcomes, not only for us as a mission organization, but also for the children and families to whom we minister. God is using us to transform lives for him, and we are all excited about that!"

Serving food at a city mission.

One avenue that God has used to transform TCM and the people it serves is through its prayer network. Once a week prayer and praise e-mails are distributed to interested persons.

"We regularly experience the power of prayer," Little affirms. "Small and large evidences in transformation occur regularly. I'm not sure if these things would necessarily happen if not for prayer and intercession." He relates the dilemma faced by TCM in March 2003 when the March break day camp for children in the community – an essential respite service for working parents – had insufficient volunteers for the St. Jamestown location. It appeared that the day camp would be canceled, a real hardship for parents who would have to scramble for childcare, and for the children who needed supervision and wholesome, challenging activities.

"In faith we decided to go ahead with the camp and trust that God would provide the eight volunteers per day that we needed to run the camp," Little recalls. "We prayed about this need as a staff team and asked people on the prayer network to pray. God is faithful! Several days before the camp was scheduled to start volunteers from near and far arrived! We were able to provide a great March break day camp program for the children and families in the St. Jamestown community."

On October 21 about 200 supporters attended TCM's fundraising 125th anniversary celebration in the Royal York Hotel. The event raised $136,000 for inner-city children and families. Throughout the year and into 2005 the celebrations will continue. In the spring TCM will host an informal community celebration for all interested persons. Details about this event will be posted on their website in March 2005.

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EDITORIAL TEAM & PRODUCTION STAFF
Editor: Harry der Nederlanden editor@christiancourier.ca
Circulation: Rose der Nederlanden
subscriptions@christiancourier.ca
Accounts/Advertising Manager: Ineke Medcalf-Strayer
ads@christiancourier.ca

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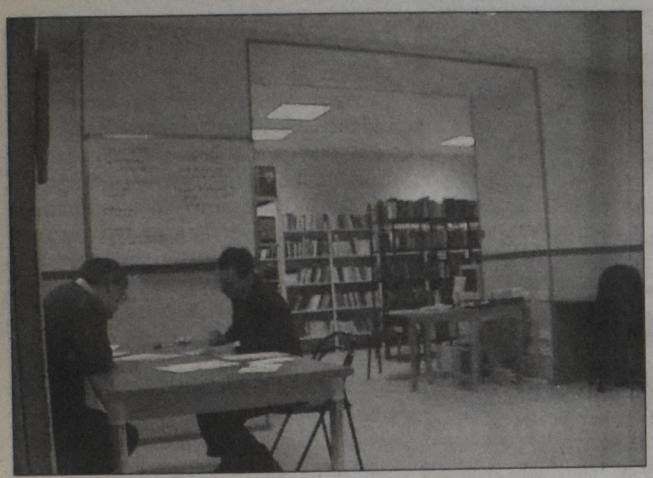
"This story needed to be told and Tymen Hofman is best qualified to tell it. His careful record of the historical data is lit up by numerous anecdotes. (Do read the sidebars and boxes!) Meet the saints and sinners whose works Hofman describes and evaluates. All who love the CRC in Canada as Hofman does (see Appendix) should own this book."
– Andrew Kuyvenhoven

News

Unique gift – books on foot



Gary Timmerman

In the myriad towns and villages across Russia's soggy backwaters, it's a tough go for any Russian missionary to penetrate the hearts of change-resistant, disheartened people left behind in the new Russia. These are the places where Stalin's political prisoners met the gulag, a breeding ground for mistrust and bitterness, and not just mosquitoes. Church buildings were largely erased from the landscape, Bibles and religious books burned. In fear, grandmothers clung to the old beliefs, but the Christian Gospel was definitely under wraps.

Into the picture arrives the Holy Spirit in the life of Andrei Melnikov, a deacon in the Baptist Union where over 300 missionaries are attempting to plant churches. Andrei has his own church, a publishing company "Staff" and a Christian bookstore. Since 1999, he has developed the mobile library plan into an effective missionary tool.

With backpack, table and 30 - 50 books, mission workers acquire an ability to engage unbelievers in conversation using Christian books, and use this street-side chat to invite a seeking Russian into a local congregation. Christian Reformed World Missions invests an annual grant with Andrei to purchase new books to expand the collections and send out new ones.

Over five years, 150 libraries have been sent out and 78 collections were enlarged. Missionaries are asked to submit quarterly reports bearing statistics and anecdotal notes of encounters.

The most active missionary fields at this time are around the Ural Mountains, in the Chelyabinsk, Kemerovsky, and Krasnoyarsk regions. Much of Siberia was settled and developed under the Soviet age, so there are really very few churches or Christian institutions in place. – 4-year highlights: 24,000 books loaned, 1252 readers entered churches, 720 accepted Christ – World Bible League conferences also support these missionaries, by helping to organize and equip Bible Study groups. Some libraries in fact graduate' into churches, and this is how some libraries lapse their activity – a positive end!

Andrei requests that regional conferences be organized to train librarians in the techniques of building relationships through books. CRWM realizes that it is much more stewardly and effective to have the grant program as an ongoing component of our ministry. We are equipping nationals who more effectively know how to minister to the needs of the culture and people.

In spring 2005, I hope to visit these regions in provincial Russia if funds allow for the training conferences.

See the website at www.grace-crwm.info for more information

"There is nothing ordinary about this mobile library! Although 70 years of enforced atheism has erased much knowledge of the Bible, people seeking truth still gravitate toward books. In 150 remote communities across the wilds of Siberia, a mobile library lends out Christian books that foster a deeper, intelligent understanding of Christianity – books that simply cannot be found otherwise. Cost: $16 per set of four books." – one of your options in the CRC Christmas Gift Catalog!

President Bush . . . again

Principalities & Powers
David T. Koyzis

Last month Americans exercised the right to vote in larger than expected numbers and in so doing gave their president, George W. Bush, four more years in office. To be sure, the country is still divided, as it was in 2000. Pundits have taken note of the split between the so-called red and blue states, the red going for Bush and the blue for John Forbes Kerry. A county-by-county map shows a further split between rural and small-town America on the one hand and urban America on the other, with Kerry's "blue" supporters largely limited to the latter.

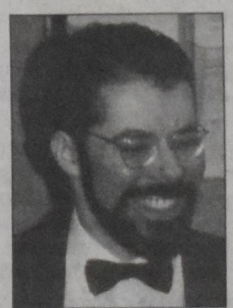
What was remarkable about this year's results is that they varied so little from those of four years ago, despite the altered international climate. At that time Bush's focus was more on domestic policy, leading him to establish the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Foreign policy concerns took a back seat. That was before 9/11. Afterwards, of course, everything changed, as security issues became paramount. The US launched a controversial attack on Iraq, without the support of the United Nations and despite the active opposition of some of its more important allies. Although Saddam Hussein's government was quickly toppled, the US has been unable to bring order to the country.

Yet Americans appear largely to have voted with other concerns in mind. Even the media have uncharacteristically picked up on their interest in moral issues this time around. Worries over the abortion licence, stem cell research and same-sex marriage seem to have prompted an unprecedented number of Americans to vote for someone who, though flawed in many respects, nevertheless took a firmer stand on these than his opponent.

Indeed the geographic boundary between red and blue states seems to run largely along the frontline in the "culture wars," an expression made popular by James Davison Hunter more than a decade ago. The media have long noted the role of evangelical protestants and Catholics in the Republican Party. What they have failed to observe is the extent to which the Democratic Party has been dominated by secularists since the 1970s, as chronicled by sociologists Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio, among others. Due to this phenomenon, the Democrats have allowed themselves to move too far out of the American mainstream and have nominated mostly unelectable candidates for the presidency over the past 30 years.

Of course, one shouldn't overstate the differences between the two parties, both of which represent the larger legacy of liberalism, though drawing on different strands. Using my own categories, the Republicans tend to reflect the influence of the second and third stages of liberalism, namely the night watchman state and the regulatory state, while the Democrats embody liberalism in its fourth and fifth stages, namely the equal opportunity state and the choice-enhancement state. Republicans have figured out a way to synthesize traditional christian belief with the classical liberal ideology of especially the second stage. Witness Bush's speeches ascribing near redemptive qualities to the spread of freedom.

Yet the Democrats have bought into a more obviously secular mindset for which belief in a transcendent God is increasingly foreign. How long they can continue in this vein is difficult to say. The self-interested desire to win power, if nothing else, may force an internal reassessment. That the Republicans' synthesis might be an unstable one is something which has yet to occur to its supporters, especially among evangelicals and Catholics. However, for the near future, and for better or worse, the Republicans have the advantage over their opponents.



David T. Koyzis teaches political science at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, and is the author of the award-winning Political Visions and Illusions *(InterVarsity Press). His weblog can be found at:* <http://byzantinecalvinist.blogspot.com/>.

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Advent

This same Jesus will come again: our double expectation

T.F. Torrance

This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.
Acts 10:20

This same Jesus will actually come again – that is the exciting and exhilarating message we consider especially at Advent. Even when throughout the Advent season we think mostly of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, the message of Advent is that he who was born to be King will come again as the King of Glory to take up his power and to reign over the nations and over all creation.

That is not a message that can be confined to a few weeks in the year, for the whole life of the Church is governed by it. Therefore all our thought and all our work must be allowed to come under the impact of Advent. This same Jesus will come again!

Who is this Jesus? He is the Jesus of Bethlehem, the Jesus of Calvary, the Jesus of the Resurrection. It is identically the same Jesus as the historical Jesus who will come again.

Let us think about the significance of that.

This same Jesus is the Jesus of Bethlehem. He is the eternal Son of God who entered into our human life and was born at Bethlehem into a human family as the child of Mary. And he was called *Jesus*, which means *Savior*, because he came to save his people from their sins – that was the kind of King he was born to be: not the kind of king who is infinitely exalted over our human history quite untouched by its desperate perplexity and hopeless misery, but the King who has himself come into our human situation by becoming a man among us, come into the midst of our responsibilities and guilt, in order to take it all on his own shoulders, and so to stand surety for us within our frailty and corruption and lostness. He came in fact to share to the full our human life that we might share his eternal life. He came to be the life of our life and so to redeem us and reconcile us to God against whom we have been rebels and sinners.

That is the breath-taking good news of Christmas, that in the birth of Jesus the eternal God has bound himself up with us in the same bundle of life, that God has embroiled himself for ever with our human history with all its sin and failure and guilt, so that now the whole of our human destiny depends entirely upon Jesus. It is this same Jesus who will actually come again.

This same Jesus is also the Jesus of Calvary. He is God himself who has stooped down to bear our sin, and to take our judgment upon himself in order to do away with our sin and to forgive us and to release us from our guilty past.

What a baffling creature man is! It is the glory of man that he has a history, a history of magnificent achievements, but man has also a past, a wicked past. That is the fateful and demonic thing about man: he has a past which he cannot undo, a past which is not dead but actively alive, for as surely as a rudder steers a ship from behind, so the past steers man's course through history. And yet that is not a good analogy – we can manipulate the rudder of a ship, but we cannot manipulate the past; we cannot change or alter it in the slightest.

That is worth thinking about more fully. Let us take the case of two young people who get married, and then later in fearful tragedy are divorced. Divorce does not and cannot alter the fact that though they were virgins when they got married they are no longer virgins: each has permanently changed the being of the other in a way that no power in all the universe can undo. So it is with sin against God and against man: nothing can alter the fact of sin; it enters – permanently – into the past and remains there; no matter how much it is hated and regretted, it cannot be recalled. That is "the terrible grief, the awful damage, the unappeasable agony" of man's past.

That is the horror and curse not only of every man but of mankind, of the history of the nations. He who could deal with this, who could bear the judgment and wrath that fall upon man because of his sin, he who could cancel guilt, undo the past, take away its curse, and set man entirely free and give him a new life, he would be the mightiest power in heaven and earth. He would be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the only real Savior.

But that is just who Jesus is, the Man of Calvary, for he is God Almighty come down into our sinful history to take upon himself man's guilt and shame. He even entered into man's death, where judgment upon man's past is piled up high against him. He took all that upon himself for man's sake, that by bringing it upon his own self, God might bring man pardon, absolution and salvation.

And so the Cross stands in the midst of human history, for in the crucified Jesus God himself has penetrated into the fateful destiny of history, into its innermost tragedy and curse, and now he holds the keys of death and hell in his hands. It is this Jesus who bears the sin of the world, this same Jesus who will come again.

Christ reigning in glory as depicted by Jan van Eyck

This same Jesus is also the Jesus of the Resurrection. It belongs to the very essence of the Christian faith that Jesus rose again from the dead in body, in the fullness of his humanity. If the resurrection of Jesus is not a literal and actual fact, then the powers of death remain unbroken and sin and guilt have triumphed after all, even over Jesus – then we are yet in our sins and without any hope whatsoever.

Everything depends upon the actual physical resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is not dead. He is not a ghost. He did not disappear into the thin air of spirit. He rose again as Man, and opened up a way of salvation for us men and women of flesh and blood. Far from being held captive by the bonds of sin and death, far from being made a prisoner for ever by entering into a guilty past that cannot be undone, Jesus Christ did the impossible: he snapped the bonds of sin and guilt; he broke open the prison-house of the past and shattered the power of death by his resurrection from the grave.

And now he is alive for ever more on the other side of corruption and death and judgment, in the life of the new creation. It is this resurrected and triumphant Jesus, this same Jesus, who will come again.

Can we wonder, then, that the Early Church was tense with excitement at the thought that this same Jesus would come again? When he comes he will come with the destiny of men and nations in his hands; he will come to fulfil his judgment upon all evil and to release history from the tragedy of guilt that no man can undo, and he will make all things new. He will come as the King of Glory to take his power and reign over a renewed creation. That will be the Kingdom of Peace to which there will be no end.

But why does he postpone his coming, and what will be the sign of his coming? Those questions were already asked by people in New Testament times, and they are still being asked. What is the answer to them? Why does Jesus postpone his coming? Why has he already postponed his coming back to the world for nearly 1900 years?

In his first Advent, Jesus came not with glory and power but in grace and humiliation. He came in such a way as to enter into our guilty human life and to heal it from within by his suffering and death on the Cross. God could have destroyed all evil by a single stroke of his hand, but far from saving or healing man, that would have destroyed mankind altogether along with all sin and evil. Therefore God took a different course altogether. In his infinite mercy and patience he stooped down in Jesus Christ, and entered into our sinful human life with all its proud self-sufficiency and incurable self-will, and when in enmity against God and in proud rebellion against his grace man crucified Jesus on the Cross, God took that Cross and made it the instrument for the healing of the nations.

And so it is by the same Cross preached among all nations that God in Christ patiently seeks and saves the lost. It is because he wants all men to be saved that Christ has planted his Cross in the midst of history and through his Cross is still at work in the midst of history, so that in a very real sense all history is gathered into the passion of Christ. He has postponed his coming in power and glory because he wants to rule over the hearts of men from his Cross; he has postponed his coming in might and judgment because he wants first to meet

The fullness of time

This is the age when
crickets no longer scare us
unless they are black, their legs
made of canons, their helmets
made of human skulls, their
wings helicopter blades
and they come roaring down
on us riding motorcycles
and spewing flame.

This is the age when
frogs are cute and sing on
television, ride around
in baby carriages – unless
they barge into the shopping
mall at Christmas shouting
religious greetings in strange
tongues with bombs strapped
to their green bodies.

This is the age when
rivers of blood are
as commonplace as
rivers of oil.
They mingle well –
red and black –
with rivers of gold.
We weave them together
into Christmas garlands
to grace the wooden tree.

This is the age when
the eldest son of every
prominent family has
long ago died mugged
in some alley in Amerika
drenched in alcohol
soul-killed by drugs
body riddled with disease
enjoying liberty.

This is the age when
we no longer flee from
Pharaoh for he is ours
bought and paid for –
him and all his host –
and Israeli ships
machine guns cocked
patrol the red sea crossing.

This is the age when
Jesus cannot find
a barn to be born into
that isn't already occupied
with refugees sleeping
wall to wall
bug-eyed children staring
silent into the holy night
waiting for the angel
with his bloody brush.

This is the age when
the desire of the ages
pressed down under
strata upon strata
of sedimented darkness
dense as coal reinforced
with terror and bone
flares up
into conflagrations
of prayer
of hope
of expectation.

And a star is kindled
to pierce
the darkness like a spear.

HdN

Joining the Eternal University

Eternal Student

Peter Schuurman

The new column title "Eternal Student" is a regrettable one. First of all, in the minds of many it is a slanderous term to be equated with "educated bum" or one who has no vocational identity. It is what you call that poorly dressed and unshaven nephew who must have been in university for at least ten years running and has still never seen a full-time salary. He travels during his summers, teaching English in Ukraine, and spends his Christmas vacation reading novels that relate to Japanese history while listening to Brazilian samba. At family reunions, concerned relatives politely but nervously ask, "What are you going to do with your education?"

The other liability with regards to this new column title is the first word "eternal." Sad to say, this word has been sorely abused, even to the point that some clergy refrain from using it.

"Eternal" now has connotations of meaning "timeless," pertaining to a spatially distant, ethereal location, or just meaning a static "forever and ever and ever." Professors might label it Platonic, naming it as detachment from earthly life. Reformed scholars will run detours around the term. It smells of a dualistic bifurcation between heaven and earth, between some spiritual realm and everyday life.

The persistently teachable heart

Yet I have decided to name the column "Eternal Student." I want to make every article I write an effort to redeem the concept. In fact, it is my ambition to seduce readers into desiring the status of "eternal student" for themselves. The term has potential to mean something very rich and enviable. An eternal student can be anyone who has a passion for learning and an attraction to places of learning. It can be a synonym for the teachable heart, or the seeking soul. It can be the name you give to that aunt who has no end of interests – who is one week starting bee hives in her backyard and the next week preparing a presentation on Christianity and euthanasia. She is eager to listen, always asking questions. She does it not only for the pleasure it gives her soul, but for its edge on Kingdom life, perhaps not unlike that nephew mentioned above. If we excavate the term "eternal" more deeply, we see its redemption has already begun. When Jesus offered eternal life, he was always gifting it in the present. Eternity, says the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, was placed in the hearts of every human being by the Creator. It is a longing as much as it is a long time. It is literally "the age to come" but carries the tension of the "already-not yet." Eternal life begins now and thrusts forward into God's rule, a society without fear or hatred. It is a term that is not exclusive of earth, but is as inexhaustive as God's presence and love. It integrates the broadest perspective you can imagine. In fact, a colorful and robust imagination is the life-blood of an eternal student.

Eternal life takes a twist

My eternal life has taken a turn. For years I wrote a column entitled "Campus Culture," where I shared stories from my life as campus minister at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. Now I have been appointed to a new position with CRCNA Home Missions, co-ordinating campus ministries across the country. As "Educational Mission Leader," which is the official title, I will be resourcing campus ministers, campus committees, classis, and all our partners in order to nurture the most culturally sensitive, Spirit-led, Kingdom vision for campus we can imagine. We do this as the church, extending ourself into territory that is not our own.

I will write about what I see and hear as I travel from campus to campus. I hope to tell stories of eternal students, and in the process, inspire some new ones. In a world of vanishing horizons, we must name and demonstrate the blessed eternal as often as we can. In a world where so many empires wrestle for power, we must pursue the one good kingdom with keen insight and deep resolve.

Peter Schuurman is the Christian Reformed Educational Mission Leader and residing in Guelph, Ontario.

...continued from page 6

with every man at his Cross, there to release him from his sin and guilt, there to ask of him the love of his heart, and there to remake him as God's dear child.

But this time which God has given for the preaching of the Gospel to all nations, time for repentance and decision, does not go on forever. It will have an end, for Jesus Christ will return in power to fulfil what he has promised, to undo the past, and to make all things new. Those who refuse to repent, who still cling to their past, will themselves be undone, for they will come under the judgment of Christ by which he will release his creation from the curse and tragedy of evil. But to all who repent, who have learned to take up his Cross and follow him, Jesus Christ will return not only to judge but to set them at liberty and to make all things new.

When Jesus will come again in power and glory to take up his reign we do not know. He has told us that it will be sudden, and just when we expect it least, like a thief in the night. But there are signs of his coming. They are not signs that tell us when he will come, but signs and pledges telling us unmistakably that the end will come, as surely as day follows night, and that world history will be brought to a close.

The signs make it more and more clear that the only thing that holds back the end of history is God's patience that waits to give men time to hear the Gospel and believe. But they are signs that direct our eyes forward to the coming of Jesus, and keep us on the tip-toe of expectation.

We live today in such a period of history. There have been wars and rumors of wars, and men's hearts fail with fear of the calamities that may come upon the earth, but the end is not yet. It is almost like the stillness before a storm, when the birds flap their wings in frightened anxiety, and all nature seems to hold its breath, waiting for the first streak of lightning and the stroke of thunder that will change the whole atmosphere. God gives us signs in history like that, not in order to predict the time of Christ's coming but to keep us faithful to our task of preaching the Gospel to all nations, and serving of our fellow-men in acts of unstinting love.

Those who are reminded by these signs to be faithful to his task will not hang about waiting for something to happen, but will go forth to meet his coming Lord by pouring out their own lives in the service of the Gospel. And those who in that service have learned to love their fellows, to understand and share their suffering, and to long for their redemption, will be thrown back again and again upon the glorious hope of Advent: *This same Jesus will come*, and they too will pray fervently like the early Christians, *Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*

From: *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1957.

Chinese church flourishes despite 50 years of persecution

Chinese Christians worshiping

Alan Doerksen

FORT ERIE, ON (CANS) – Persecution has been a way of life for Christians in China since Communists took control there in the 1950s. But remarkably, the church has grown at an incredible rate over the past 50 years.

"Persecution helps revival," asserts Dr. Freddie Sun, China Division Director for Christian Aid. In the past 50 years, he observes, the Chinese church has grown from one million to 100 million Christians.

"A little bit of pressure with a little bit of freedom is the ideal climate for evangelism," says Sun. "Right now is the best time to help Chinese missionaries evangelize their land and plant churches."

This year, persecution of Christians in China is at about the same level as it has been for the last few years, reports Sun. Since the spring of 2003, when China renewed its leadership from the younger generation both in the Communist Party and government, the general situation in China has become pretty tight. The new leaders are more pragmatic, but very cautious. Religiously, they are especially on guard to prevent what they call "Christian infiltration from overseas," which means evangelism from abroad.

Recently, pastors from Taiwan and Korea visited China and were detained and then released by authorities. In reaction to these foreign visits, some teaching materials printed by underground house churches were confiscated, and house church leaders were arrested. In January 2004, when the national religious conference was held, the Communist chiefs of religious bureaus attended. There they saw a Christian documentary film "The Cross" about past and present persecutions and revivals of the house church movement in China. Communist leaders were shocked about the wide spread of Christianity, as the number of Christians in China has risen to over 100 million, double the number of Communist Party members.

So another round of persecution began to stop the showing of the film. But it was too late; "The Cross" and even the film of "The Passion of the Christ" are being copied, recopied and spread over China.

"How spiritually hungry and thirsty the Chinese people are!" declares Freddie Sun.

Recently, the Chinese government has been easing up on the persecutions of underground churches and Christians in the province of Hunan. Two years ago, the head of the Religious Affairs Bureau of Hunan province, a communist official, was invited to visit South Korea. He traveled to Seoul via Hong Kong. When he stopped in Hong Kong, he saw the prosperity of the city and on the street believers reached out to him sharing Jesus.

It was already dark when he arrived at Seoul and before landing at the airport he saw from the air many churches with bright shining crosses. He was very impressed that in Korea, Christianity brings prosperity and all the Christians are polite.

After he returned, he encouraged the churches in Hunan to start more training. He realizes that once the believers are trained, church affairs would be easier to handle, and his job and responsibility would be lightened.

One Eye Open, One Eye Closed

Some government officials pursue a "keeping one eye open and one eye closed" policy toward Christian meetings and activities. For instance, Christmas celebrations are very popular now across China and Christians of officially registered and underground churches take the opportunity to share Jesus with ordinary people during the Christmas season.

"We take this opportunity to evangelize the Chinese – to tell them that Jesus is the Son of God," reports Sun.

Another factor which is diverting the Communist government's attention from the church is a host of other enemies within and around China. They include separatists in Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet, anti-Communist dissidents, and the Falun Gong religious movement.

"We understand that House Churches are the #6 enemies of the Communists," explains Sun.

As the 2008 Beijing Olympics approach, Sun believes the Chinese government will persecute Christians somewhat less, because of world scrutiny.

In 2010, a World Trade Exhibit will be held in Shanghai, which will also bring much world attention.

"These two big events will compel the Chinese government to be more moderate, more open," asserts Sun.

Ironically, the Communists have actually made the spread of the gospel easier in some ways, observes Sun. "God used Communist armies to allow Christians more access to Tibet and Muslim regions of China. In those tribal groups, in places like Tibet and Chinese Muslim areas in the northwestern tip of China, we are not able to have a Bible school, because it's very sensitive, religiously and politically. So we began our compassion projects, [such as] farming in the Muslim areas and the government welcomed these projects." These include orphanages for abandoned or handicapped children in Tibet and other regions.

Alan Doerksen, former journalist for CC, is now the editor of Christian Aid News Service (CANS-Christian Aid Mission, Fort Erie, ON) which supplied this report. Christian Aid Mission, a registered Canadian charity, carries out mission programs and reports on the work of indigenous missionary activity in many countries.

Dead man 'reconverted'

India (Compass) — Residents of Gurandi village, Orissa, dug up the body of a Catholic man on October 4 and ceremonially "reconverted" him to Hinduism, along with the living members of his family. The incident was triggered when Bala Tulasiga, a 35-year-old Catholic convert, was buried in a Hindu cemetery.

Purna Chandra Mohapatra, district president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council), encouraged residents to protest the burial. Rev. Dr. D. B. Hrudaya, general secretary of the local chapter of the All India Christian Council, said Christians had used the common Hindu cremation grounds on earlier occasions, "but this time the villagers objected to the burial at the instigation of the VHP."

Christians charged with 'wounding religious feelings'

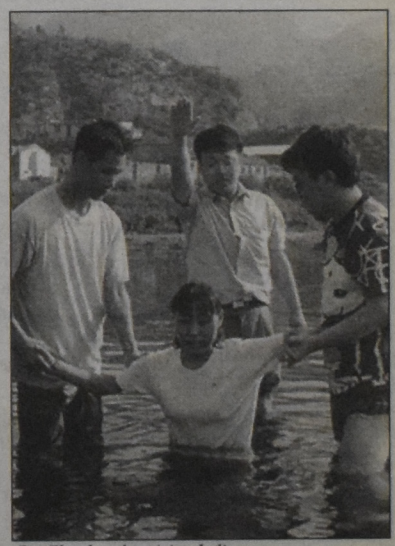
India (Compass) – An Indian court recently charged five Christians with the crime of "wounding the religious feelings" of Hindus after a complaint was lodged in the tribal belt of Orissa. The Christians were released on bail on October 28. Lawyer Pratap Chhinchani, who will defend the five in court, said he believed a Hindu extremist group was behind the complaint and that the charges were false.

Meanwhile, the World Hindu Council continued its "reconversion" drive in Orissa unhindered by local authorities. Christians reject the term "reconversion to Hinduism," since most tribal converts were animists before they turned to Christianity. However, Indian law regards tribal peoples as Hindu in origin.

Hindu Re-Conversion Ceremony

China tightens control on religion

China (Compass) – A series of arrests and raids in China during September and October indicate that a new crackdown is underway against Christians, even as the government professed its willingness to liberalize its policies on religion. Well-known evangelical leader Cai Zhuohua was among those arrested and reportedly faces an extremely harsh sentence because of his role in house church leadership and religious literature distribution.



Cai Zhuohua baptizing believers

Earlier Compass reported that Chinese officials had publicly declared new changes in religious policy, but evidence has since emerged that the regime issued three internal directives in August calling for much tighter control of religion. According to a report in a Chinese-language magazine, the new directives aim to suppress the conversion of Communist Party members, the growth of religion and religious organizations across the country, and the increase of religious activity on university campuses.

Ivory Coast: Christians anxious as war threatens

Rebels in Ivory Coast take hostages

Elizabeth Kendal

AUSTRALIA (ANS) — When mostly Muslim rebels (backed with foreign funds and arms) seized control of northern Ivory Coast (IC) in 2002, Christians, southerners and government supporters fled south for their lives. As those fleeing included most of northern IC's doctors, nurses, professionals, administrators and school teachers, living conditions in the north have deteriorated markedly under rebel control. Of great concern are reports from MSF (Doctors without Borders) and the UN that AIDS has increased markedly in the north as desperate girls prostitute themselves to survive. Having abandoned the government of national unity, the rebels declared in mid October their refusal to negotiate further or disarm.

On November 4, President Laurent Gbagbo launched a surprise air raid on rebel strongholds in the north, attempting to defeat them militarily and re-unify the country. When nine French peacekeepers in rebel territory were killed in an air raid November 6, France immediately responded by destroying the two IC helicopter gunships used in the raid. France then struck preemptively to 'neutralize' IC air power, destroying all IC's air force planes and the airport tarmac. When French tanks then headed for the Presidential Palace, government supporters streamed into the streets and created a human shield around it. Some government supporters furiously attacked French interests. While no non-African died in the protests, French soldiers killed up to 100 and wounded some 1,000 protesting government supporters.

Though France, the former colonial power in IC, is acting as peacekeeper and peace mediator, it is not neutral. Intelligence agencies have long believed that France would like to see or even engineer a coup in IC. President Gbagbo is opposed to the pro-France policies of IC, believing they are not in IC's best interests. Gbagbo's rival, A. D. Ouattara, the president of the RDR party with which the rebels are aligned, implemented many pro-France initiatives when he was Prime Minister. France would benefit economically if Ouattara were back in power. What we have today is a still uncertain future, with a three-way stand off between the IC, France and the rebels.

IC has a huge population of immigrants from Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso, its poorer northern Islamic neighbors. The possibility of the rebels' aims succeeding causes IC's Christians great anxiety as all these migrants would be naturalized, making IC instantly a Muslim majority nation. Then, by the strength of their votes, the constitution could be amended and A D Ouattara elected president. (Presently he is barred from the presidency due to issues of nationality.) If that happens, IC will never be the same again, but will become a reflection of its northern Islamic neighbors. This scenario does not sit well with Ivorians – Muslim, Christian and traditional religionists – who regard their liberty as precious.

Elizabeth Kendal is the Principal Researcher and Writer for the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Com-mission (WEA RLC)

Year-end gifts to charity

This service [giving] that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 2 Cor. 9:12

One of the privileges of being a wise steward of our time, talents, trees and treasures is that it enables us to have more that we can give away. Giving, as Paul expresses it above, is a privilege that meets the needs of others, and it overflows in gratitude to God for his abundance.

Yet, when it comes to giving, we often get into a neglectful pattern. We procrastinate or delay our giving until it becomes a year-end 'crunch time' activity. I've asked, Greta Luimes, my colleague and the CSS representative for Ontario East and the Maritimes to provide some tips that we all might consider that will help us with our year-end giving and finding a better way to be wise stewards in giving.

Greta writes:

It might be the holiday spirit, the deficit budget at church or just thoughts about next spring's income tax bill that cause many people to begin feeling charitable as the end of the year approaches. If you want to add to your donations for 2004, start planning now and at the same time, put in place a process for next year that will eliminate this struggle each year end.

Here are some tips to assist with your year-end giving decisions:

- Look at your stock portfolio to determine if now is the time to gift an appreciated stock. Remember that in doing so, you will enjoy significant savings on your capital gains and you'll receive a donation receipt for the value of the stock the day of to give it to charity.
- Review your life insurance policies to see if there are any you no longer require that could be given over to charity. You would receive a receipt for any cash value included in the policy.
- Determine your actual income over the year 2004 and give away what you feel the Lord is asking you to give. Perhaps you've worked more overtime than you thought, or your harvest has brought in more proceeds than calculated, or maybe you were given a promotion. Did your additional unexpected income change your giving pattern over the year or is it time to catch up?
- Take some time to pray and reflect on where the gifts will go. Kingdom work has many facets and there are so many opportunities for support. What's closest to your heart?

If, as Christians, we truly subscribe to the biblical teaching of always giving our *firstfruits* to the Lord, then we shouldn't find ourselves in this year-end giving dilemma, should we? Why not set aside a percentage of your income all year long into a separate Giving Account? It would then be available to those ministries and charities that are close to your heart when they need it most.

You could write a generous cheque to the student who asks to be supported in a summer ministry program. Your family could help the one that is struggling to make ends meet. A special offering for disaster relief could benefit from the funds that have accumulated in your Giving Account.

Bring your regular, pre-determined monthly gifts to your church and other causes but set aside the whole tithe at every pay cheque for the work of all the ministries you feel called to support. The amount (percentage) of the tithe is between you and the Lord, and you may feel challenged to increase that to a greater percentage year after year.

Your year-end giving issue may then not be: "Where will we find the money to help with the church deficit?" But rather, "What ministries will receive the additional funds we have set aside?" A nice problem to have!

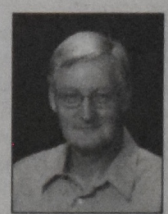
Thank you Greta for these tips. May God bless us all in this service of giving!

Stewardly Tip: Pre-Authorized Remittances (PAR)-Automatic Withdrawals

We do it for the utility bills and mortgages: why not do it for church ministry? Most denominations now offer this service for anyone who would like the convenience; but it will not feel like giving. It's not the same as participating in the offering at church. Use PAR for planned giving (i.e. how much you are going to set aside for your church's ministries in 2005), but not for free-will giving (offerings for specific causes). For the latter, use your envelope, or purchase vouchers (some churches) so that you can still take advantage of donation receipts.

Readers: We want to share your Stewardly Tips so that we all can do our part to make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Please write or email or visit the CC website. Please leave your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or, if we need to, we can ask you for more details.

Next issue: The Greatest Gift



Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario Rick's email: rickd@csservices.ca

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Christian Stewardship Services
Henry Eygenraam – Exec. Director
416-410-5719; 905-947-9262; 800-267-8890
www.csservices.ca; admin@csservices.ca

Regional Representatives
Succession, Wills and Estate Planning

Alberta – Ron Knol	780-991-3344
BC – Harry Boessenkool	604-543-6184
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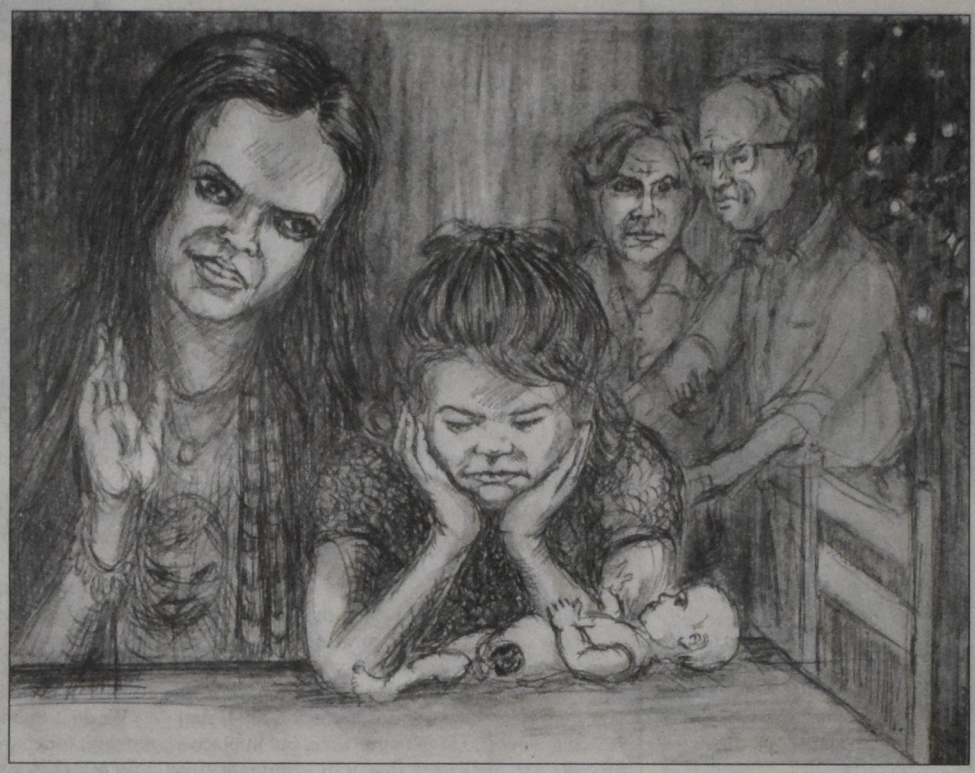
Stewardship Education Coordinator
Canada – Rick DeGraaf 519-620-2242

Story

The Gift of Grace

Ron de Boer



Meet the Koldenhovens. Natalie, body pierced, tattooed, and aged 15, hasn't heard from her boyfriend since school let out for the Christmas break, and decides she now hates Christmas; Stacey, aged 10, hopes a Christmas miracle will heal her broken doll; Ben, aged 41, is simply trying to re-capture the magic of Christmas when the girls were young; Gail, aged 41, exhausted from Christmas shopping, wrapping, and hosting the in-laws, is looking for grace to descend on the Koldenhoven household. It does – in an unexpected way.

Natalie:

If I have to listen to Amy Grant sing *Tennessee Christmas* one more time I think I'll puke. Listen to them singing along with her up there. Who gets *that* excited wrapping presents? The minute we go to bed, out comes the scotch tape and green bows. Like we still believe in Santa! My parents think they can transform us back into little girls or something at Christmas. Hello – I'm fif*teen*. I've got a *boy*friend. I buy all my own *clothes* now.

If there were a sleeping pill you could take on the 24th that would knock you out until Boxing Day, I'd buy a bottle of the stuff. I hate you, Amy Grant. And I hate how the parents sing at the tops of their lungs with you. Where's my *Usher* CD? I'll bet that little gleeb stole my *Usher* CD. "Staceeeeeeeey!"

Ben:

I'd have to say Amy Grant moves past Bing Crosby on my list of the greatest Christmas singers of all time. Can you even imagine December without *Tennessee Christmas*?

What are those two yelling about now? Why do they have to do that on Christmas Eve? They're supposed to be in bed. Why aren't they in bed? I don't *care* if they're excited about Christmas. If we don't get these presents wrapped, we'll never make it to church. Turn up the music – I can't stand to hear them yelling like that.

What's with Natalie? I knew the minute we let her get the eyebrow pierced things would go down hill. Then it was the black hair and the army fatigues. Remember the Christmas she got that Spiro-graph? Remember how she sat at the table all afternoon making those wonderful blue and pink swirls? I can hardly remember *that* Natalie anymore. Did she really once have blond ponytails? Now all she cares about is buying black finger nail polish.

And Stacey. Have you heard of a ten year-old *that* obsessed over a doll? So another leg fell off. The doll's five years old – isn't that something like 105 in human years? It's ready for the Salvation Army bin.

I'm *not* being insensitive. *I'm* the one who picked it up at *Toys R Us* that Christmas. To lock herself in her room all night crying over a baby doll is a little extreme, don't you think?

What the heck's a *tween*?

Gail:

After all these years you've never learned to fold wrapping paper. You need to take your time. Let me wrap the CD player. You do the battery packs for the stockings.

A tween is a kid stuck between childhood and her teenage years – it can be a very difficult time. Of course I bought the black finger nail polish. It's what the kids are wearing these days. We can't pretend she's not changing.

Oh, easy for you to say. I'll start taking your gift suggestions seriously the minute you do some of the shopping, mister.

I guess that slam means Natalie's back in her room again. The poor thing. I think she's having boy issues. Robert hasn't called since school let out. I *know* it's not the end of the world, but to a fifteen-year-old girl it's the end of the world.

Oh, look. It's snowing outside. Remember that Christmas eve we woke the girls up and took them to the woods to decorate that pine tree for the animals? That was such fun.

Stop it – Natalie would *not* poison the squirrels now. It's just a phase. I'm sure she'll start wearing colors again in no time. One day we'll laugh at the batman tattoos on her ankles.

Stacey:

What's *wrong* with her? If I even came near her bedroom door, she'd throw her shoes at me. Why is she so mad all the time? I will never *ever* get a boyfriend. Who'd want a boyfriend when they make you sad and mad all the time? Nat's either snapping at everyone or bouncing around like Christmas holidays are here to stay. I don't know which mood is scarier. Dad says she's like Jekyll and Hyde, whoever *they* are. I think she shocked her brain when she started using her hair-straightener.

I know you can't walk anymore … come here … mommy will put you in your crib. When I'm finished this letter and put you under the tree, you'll be all better. You'll be able to walk again and hold your bottle. I *know* it hasn't been easy living with one arm and no legs. Monster Natalie says there's no such thing as Santa, but we'll show her, won't we?

Natalie:

She is *such* a baby. What kind of ten year-old still talks to dead little dolls? And I knew she had my *Usher* CD. She puts on this I'm-just-a-little-girl gig and steals *my Usher* CD. The parents think it's hilarious, but if I took something from her room, I'd be grounded from MSN for like a week.

I hate Christmas holidays. Why can't school be on again? It's so boring around here. Even *Usher* isn't cheering me up. Robbie, why haven't you emailed me? I hate you, I hate you, I HATE you.

Ben:

Well, that about does it for the stocking stuffers. What do you say to a little Christmas wine to celebrate another year of successful wrapping?

I *know* church is at ten. I *know* we have to put the presents under the tree yet, but that only takes a minute. Yes, I know, it's our turn to host my parents for Christmas – you've mentioned it about eight times today. Sorry.

Did you recharge the batteries to the digital camera? I can't wait to see the look on Nat's face when she opens that *iPod*. She better like it, too – that thing cost me an arm and two legs.

Gail:

Stacey's light's still on. I think she's up to something. Let's not have a repeat of last year. Didn't I tell you she was going to write a letter to Santa after we'd gone to bed to prove there was no Santa? You said a nine-year-old could never get up after midnight. Good call, Ben. Set your alarm for two o'clock in case she leaves something. I just wish Natalie hadn't laughed at her like that.

Do you think Stacey still believes in Santa? And your mother better not climb on her high horse during present-opening and try to impress the real meaning of Christmas on her when she gets a present signed SANTA this year.

Stacey:

Let me read to you what I wrote, Grace: *Dear God, I know there's no such thing as Santa anymore. Natalie told me he's just an invention by a calendar artist for the Coca Cola company back in the day. Even though she tries to look like she doesn't care about anything, Natalie is really smart, so I believe her. But my Dad seems to believe in Santa, so sometimes I get confused, even though I recognize Mom's handwriting on the presents that say they're from Santa.*

Anyway, the reason I'm writing you a letter is to tell you I'm very worried about Grace. She has only one arm left on her body. Her other leg fell off yesterday. I love Grace no matter how sick she is but if I could have one wish this Christmas, it would be that you healed Grace's arm and legs. I know there's no Santa but I know you're real. You can find …

Story

Ben:

...Grace's arm and legs in the grocery bag under her crib." Yes, I realize we've dug ourselves in a hole. She doesn't believe in Santa, but she believes God can heal Grace tonight. What are we going to do?

How do I know what God would write back? It's two in the morning. I can barely talk at this hour. Is there a Bible passage or something I can quote? I can't speak in the voice of God – I'll get struck down. What are you doing? What in the world –

Gail:

It's a miracle, there's no other way to describe it. They're all there – two arms, two legs. Look at this, they even move. Grace is healed. Maybe I'll take that glass of wine now.

You're freaked out? You're also the genius who told her God fixes people, not dolls. Now what are you going to tell her?

No, we can't take the credit for this. Say we did it because God doesn't answer the prayers of little girls at Christmas? Wait a minute. There's a letter, too. Did you write a letter? Is that the computer I hear downstairs? Is she still up?

Natalie:

Robbie, I gotta go. The parents are up again and they hate when I'm on MSN after they go2bed. Thanx again for the email. I didn't get it until like 10 last night. I was getting worried you were breaking up with me!!!!! I was so messed. But your email just cheered me right up.

I even went on a random-act-of-kindness binge with my little sister. Don't ask me where that came from. Yes, I got u something. What do u think? U got me something, too, right? That's OK. U R right – we didn't talk about it. No, the whole family is coming over tomorrow. Maybe Boxing Day. Parents on the stairs. Gotta go.

Ben:

What gets into that girl? MSN at two in the morning? It's like we've never had rules around here. And did you note the look of surprise on her face when we asked her what she was doing? I just want to say 'who are you and what have you done with our daughter?' Are you *sure* the envelope is sealed?

You're putting me on, right? *You* fixed Grace and wrote the letter back to Stacey. Don't give me that Miss Innocent look. Okay, I'll play along. I think it's a wonderful thing you've done, Gail. I'm *not* being a smart aleck.

Me? I was in bed beside *you*. When would I have had time to write a letter and fix Grace's arms and legs? God?

Gail:

Why not God? He sent his son to earth. You don't think he can fix a plastic doll? Why is it we believe the entire Christmas story but we laugh at the suggestion God would fix a little girl's doll? Why do we make fun of people who think real miracles happen on earth? And don't start in about Benny Hinn!

Do you think it's possible Natalie did it?

Ben:

Then we better open it. Who knows what she'd say to her sister – probably tell her the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy and Santa all belong to a New York gang. Careful not to tear it. We can glue the flap back on.

Well, what's it say?

Gail:

It's from God. I'm *not* kidding.

Dear Stacey. I know how much you love Grace. I love Grace, too. In fact everyone in your family loves Grace, even Natalie, even though she sometimes doesn't show it. No one could love Grace as much as you, though. I have healed Grace's body. Look how beautiful she looks in her manger. She looks kind of like Jesus laying there, doesn't she?

You're probably wondering why I did this for you. Well, do you remember that Christmas when you were little and you went to the forest to decorate a tree for the animals? Remember how you told your sister Natalie how you bet God is looking down on the forest and smiling? And remember how you said the moon was God's flashlight? You were right, Stacey. I was smiling down on you that night. And I know you believe in me with all your heart. And I happen to know Natalie is thinking about that night right this moment and wishes you could go back to that forest.

I'm sorry about my messy handwriting. I'm in a bit of a hurry. There are people calling out my name all over the world tonight – to end wars, to cure diseases, to fix other dolls. Don't you wish everyone could just love each other and forget about all their problems just for one night?

I love you, Stacey. Have a very merry Christmas.

G.

P. S. Santa says hi.

Ben:

Natalie? How did she learn to use my glue gun?

Gail:

Natalie. She wrote it with her left hand.

Stacey:

Mom! Dad! Look what Natalie gave me for Christmas – her *Usher* CD! And look – Grace is all better. We get to spend Christmas with Grace!

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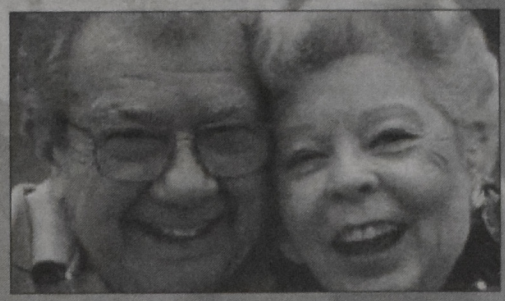

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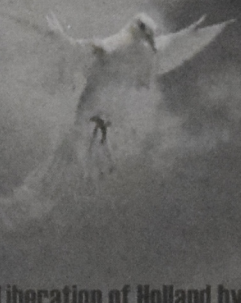

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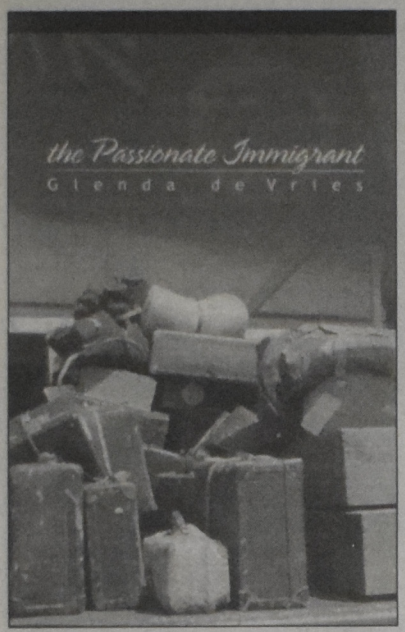
Immigrant days

the Passionate Immigrant



Chapter taken from the book 'The Passionate Immigrant' by Glenda deVries

CHAPTER 13

Lachen als een boer die kiespijn heeft.
To laugh like a farmer with a toothache.

By the time they arrived at Anna and Johan's sponsor, it was early evening. The taxi took them up the gravel driveway to the main house. By now they were used to the houses, so they didn't consider this house unusual. It was a bungalow with aluminum siding and small windows with the paint peeling from the window frames. Rows and rows of vegetables grew behind and all around it. Every square foot was used for crops.

Neither one of them took note of the dilapidated shed that stood about two hundred feet from the house.

As the taxi pulled up to the house, the farmer and his wife came to the doorway. "We've been expecting you," the farmer called out as he threw his finished cigar on the ground.

He was tall, strong and sturdy, and he reminded Anna of the English workhorses. The skin on his face looked like a beaten brown leather purse, but his smile was wide and his teeth sparkled in the evening light. As they approached and he extended his hand to greet them, she noticed his hands were extra large. Even though he was a big man, his hands still looked out of proportion to the rest of his body. He was dressed in blue coveralls with dirt stains at the knees, pockets, and pant cuffs.

Compared to him, the farmer's wife was tiny, fitting neatly under his armpit. She had short curly gray hair with a kerchief tied under her chin. She had a tender smile with lines and creases on her face that showed she was experiencing chronic pain, perhaps the pain of hard work.

"We ummm explain…," Anna said as Wilma was getting the twins out of the car.

"Don't you mind at all," said the farmer's wife. "Your husbands called and explained everything. Ned and I have already made plans for both families to stay with us."

Anna and Wilma appeared bewildered.

"They don't understand you, Nelly." Then turning to Anna and Wilma he said, "I'm sorry. You stay. Stay with us. Okay? That's right. No need to worry about a thing. We sure could use the help and you are more than welcome," Ned said warmly as the four of them approached the house.

"Come on in. We have a warm dinner prepared for you. Wash?" Nelly made the motion of washing her hands. Nelly smiled up at them and then she winced and held her back as she turned to go back into the house.

"Thank you, thank you," Wilma and Anna said in unison, even though they didn't fully understand what was being said.

They followed Nelly into the house while Ned held the door open. Once inside, they stopped and scanned the room as the boys ran past them. The rooms were full with simple and practical pine furniture and everything appeared to be tidy and in good repair. Nelly had covered all the couches with brown and orange knitted wool afghans.

The children ran around the living and dining rooms in search of something, and then they ran up to their mother and asked where the toys were.

Wilma looked at the Canadians and struggled to find the English word for toys.

Ned and Nelly looked at them with raised eyebrows. "What are they asking? Would they like some juice?" Ned asked.

"No," Anna said, "Umm, how do you say…," and then she pretended to push a train across the table. She cleared her throat; it had become hoarse out of exhaustion.

"Yes, yes," the farmer laughed as Anna straightened up again, "you came by train."

Anna and Wilma looked at each other again and sighed. "No," Anna persisted, "look" then she mimed playing with blocks on the floor and then she pointed at the children.

"Oh! I see!" Nelly said. "They want toys for the kids, Ned."

"I'm sorry," Ned said as he turned to them. "We don't have any toys. You see, we don't have any children. So," he laughed uncomfortably and shrugged his shoulders, "we don't have any toys."

Wilma turned to the children and explained that they would have to do without toys until their crates arrived. They would have to play with the toys they had brought with them on the ship.

One of the boys threw himself on the floor and pounded his fists. The other soon followed. "I hate this place, I hate this place," they wailed in Dutch.

"Do you want a spanking?" Wilma was yelling now as the farmer, his wife, and Anna looked on helplessly.

When the kids continued to scream, Wilma picked them up, one at a time and swatted their bottoms, but that made them scream only louder.

"Oh Wilma, maybe they're just tired and hungry," Anna said, touching Wilma on the shoulder. "Let's eat quickly and put them to bed."

"If you keep crying, I'll smack you again, the Lord willing," Wilma warned.

The children whimpered and then wiped their noses with their sleeves that were no longer neatly pressed. Wilma grabbed each boy by an ear and pulled him to the table while he mouthed the word, "Ouch." Their ears were bright red and the children were quiet as they sat at this strange table. Anna looked at them with pity.

Nelly got up slowly and painfully, holding her back, and she went into the kitchen.

Anna looked at the plates with large orange flowers on them.

"So tell me," Ned asked, "what part of Holland you all from?"

Anna replied, "Uhhh, top of Holland."

"I see, and what do your husbands know about agriculture?"

"Oh Ned, just let them have their dinner first," Nelly said as she put a bowl of unpeeled potatoes on the table.

Wilma and Anna ignored the question and stared wide-eyed at the potatoes. Did Nelly forget to peel the potatoes?

"Is something wrong?" Nelly asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

"No, no," Anna said as she sat back in her chair.

When Nelly went back to the kitchen to bring out the next dish, Ned repeated his question, "What do your husbands know about agriculture?"

They ignored the question again as Nelly brought out the corn on the cob. Wilma and Anna looked at each other again.

"Mamma, Mamma," cried one of the boys in Dutch, "are they feeding the chickens?"

"Hush, hush," replied Wilma, "not another word out of either one of you tonight."

Next Nelly brought out six large pieces of beef. Wilma and Anna's mouths dropped open.

"What do you know about agriculture, uumm about plants in the ground, vegetables, caring for vegetables?"

"Me no speak English," Wilma looked at him and smiled. Anna smiled too.

Ned was slightly irritated.

"Well," Nelly let out a sigh, "I think I have everything," and she sat down beside Ned.

"Pray. We pray." Wilma announced and the children bowed their heads and so did Anna and Wilma. Ned and Nelly appeared uncomfortable as they all prayed in silence.

Wilma and Anna sat with their hands on their laps as they watched Nelly and Ned open up the unpeeled potatoes with their knives and put butter and sour cream inside. Ned immediately began to eat the potato, peel and all while Nelly picked up the corn on the cob with her bare hands and spread butter and salt over it and ate it from the cob, the butter melting and dripping between her fingers.

Although Nelly and Ned reminded Wilma of cavemen, she instructed the children to do the same.

They gave their mother an astonished look.

Wilma gave a very stern look back and pinched their skinny knees through their knickers, causing them to whimper softly.

Anna suddenly picked up a cob and briskly scraped off the corn onto her plate with her knife and then she did the same for the children. Wilma followed Anna's lead with her cob.

When it was time to eat the meat, they were shocked at the portions. The beef took up half of their plates; it would be impossible to eat all of it, but they started to cut it up with knife and fork. They rubbed their tummies as they looked at Ned and Nelly. "Thick."

"You mean you are very full?"

They nodded.

"Very good," Nelly said as she nodded to their new guests.

"Ned will show you the guesthouse."

"One minute," Wilma put up her index finger and bowed her head. In Dutch she said to the children and Anna, "Let's pray."

Nelly and Ned bowed their heads again.

Wilma prayed in Dutch, "Thank you Lord for all your blessings. Thank you for this food you have provided for us. Please be with Fokke and Johan and guide them back to us. We praise you for the hospitality that Nelly and Ned have shown to us. Amen."

The kids repeated, "Amen."

As the four of them got up and followed Ned out of the house, Anna looked back and saw Nelly struggling to get up out of her chair.

On the way out, Ned picked up their suitcases. They walked toward a shed/guesthouse two hundred feet from the house. Wilma held her sons' hands, squeezing them, as they walked.

"It's small, but we weren't expecting two families," Ned said, smiling at them. "I hope you don't mind."

The two ladies just smiled back. They felt weary from the trip and confused by what was happening, wishing they could crawl into their beds.

Immigrant days

Ned walked up to the door that hung loosely on the hinges and creaked loudly when it was pulled open. Anna grabbed Wilma's elbow and squeezed so hard Wilma jerked her arm quickly out of Anna's grasp.

Ned called, "Just a minute while I turn on the light."

The four of them stood huddled in front of the open door while Ned walked to the center of the room and reached to turn the bare light bulb on the ceiling. "Home sweet home," Ned called, apparently attempting to sound cheerful, as the women and children entered. "It's humble, but I'm sure once your stuff arrives, you can make it into whatever you want it to be."

Anna and Wilma scanned the room as the boys gripped their mother's thick, short legs. The walls, made of dented and dusty plywood, seemed to be leaning. There was a woodstove against the wall on the left and a sink with a tap beside it. There was a small, unwashed, curtainless window above the sink. A pine table with a single matching chair stood against the opposite wall. Above it was a filthy window; obviously it hadn't been washed in months. It was also without a curtain.

The floor was wooden with rough slates that creaked as Ned walked over them. It was hard to tell what kind of wood was on the floor because it was covered with dust. At the back of this one large room was a closed door. The boys were still clinging to Wilma's legs as the women walked to the back of the room while Ned lit a cigar. The women and children walked through the door and saw a smaller empty room with no windows and no light bulb.

"The outhouse is out back," Ned called out. "If that's what you're looking for."

Wilma looked back at Ned, "Uuuuh nothing?" she said with a rise at the end to indicate a question mark.

"That's right. There's nothing here, but we understood you would be bringing your own furniture from Holland. Isn't that right?"

It was hard for Anna and Wilma to tell whether the farmer sounded irritated, tired, or embarrassed. He didn't apologize for the dirty place.

"I'll ask Nelly to bring some blankets and I'll bring some straw for mattresses."

Anna and Wilma nodded and the farmer left.

"What did he say? I wish he wouldn't mumble so much in his mouth, he's so difficult to understand," Wilma said to Anna in Dutch.

"Something about blankets," Anna replied.

"This place is filthy," Wilma exclaimed.

The boys were fighting over the one chair at the table. "You can sit on the floor," Wilma called to them, irritation sounding in her tired voice. "You'll leave the chair for Mrs. Smit."

Then she turned to Anna, "We will have to manage, that is all there is to it. We must row with the paddles that we have. We have to stay positive."

"But this is terrible, really horrible. You must admit it, Wilma. This is absolutely horrible!" She slumped down on the only chair.

"It's filthy, that I will admit. But dirt can be cleaned."

"Look at this place. Who do they think we are? First they feed us food that we would serve animals in Holland, and then they lock us up in this shed," Anna cried softly into her hands.

"Remember, they ate that food too, and look where they are living...not much better."

"But there aren't any beds," Anna said through her tears.

"Apparently Ned thought we'd bring our own."

Just then Nelly walked in with an armful with blankets. As she handed Anna and Wilma the blankets she said, "I guess your pots and pans and the other household belongings are in your crate."

"Yes."

"Come in the house tomorrow morning. I'll fix you a real Canadian breakfast." She was looking at the children now as they sat quietly on the floor.

"Eat. Tomorrow." Then Nelly pointed at herself.

Wilma and Anna nodded and said, "Thank you."

After she left, Wilma whispered in case Nelly could hear through the thin door, "If tonight was a real Canadian dinner, then I would hate to see what a real Canadian breakfast is like."

"Yes," Anna's eyes suddenly lit up, relieved to hear some humor, "and," she thought for a moment and then added, "the orange juice is probably made up of juice from the entire orange – peels, pits and all."

Wilma doubled over in laughter. "Yes," she gasped between the squeals of laughter,"and if we ate an entire cow tonight, we'll probably eat an entire pig tomorrow morning!"

Just then Ned walked in with a large bundle of straw. That made them laugh even harder. Knowing they wouldn't be understood if they spoke Dutch, Anna said, "Now he's bringing us a bedtime snack!"

Convulsive laughter, brought on by exhaustion and fear, forced tears down their cheeks. Seeing the grown-ups losing control made the boys start crying. Wilma tried to comfort them by giving them a simple explanation in Dutch.

Ned looked bewildered. "Sorry, I can't share your joke," he said solemnly.

"Excuse, excuse," Wilma said to the farmer, "we tired."

"Well," he said as he took the straw to the back of the shed, "you have a funny way of showing it."

He carried the straw through the door at the back of the room and into what would pass as the bedroom. "I'll have to get some more straw for the kids," he said as he left.

Wilma released the tight grip of her children who were clinging to her legs and walked into the other room. She returned to the living room and told Anna, "He's making mattresses for us out of straw!"

"Oh! He wasn't expecting us to eat it?" Anna said, as a new spasm of laughter shook her body.

A few minutes later, Ned returned. "This should do it," he said as he walked to the bedroom with another bundle of straw, passing Anna without looking at her.

After spreading out the rest of the straw into the form of two smaller mattresses he said, "Good night ladies and kids. We'll see you in the morning. Will the kids be needing anything yet, milk, tea?"

"We no understand," Anna said again.

Ned sighed, shook his head, and said, "Good night," as he left the shed.

Wilma said to him. "Good night. Thank you."

"Good night, and thank you," Anna said, still trying to control her laughter.

The farmer left, shaking his head.

"Look at this mess," Wilma said. "We have to get rid of this dirt immediately. I can't stand it."

"What about praying first, Wilma? To thank God for delivering us safely?"

Wilma looked at Anna with scrutinizing eyes and agreed it was a good idea.

"Children, gather around the table and hold hands to pray."

"Where are we supposed to sit?" asked one of them.

"Never mind, with your young legs, there is nothing wrong with standing."

They all stood around the table, except for Anna who was still sitting in the only chair, held hands, and bowed their heads.

"Would you like to pray or should I?" Anna asked still snickering.

"You are in no state to speak respectfully to our Heavenly Father! I'll do it," Wilma said. "Thank you, Lord, for delivering us safely to this land of freedom. Thank you for giving us a home that we can call our own." Anna chortled and Wilma continued to pray, "Forgive us for our disbelief, and help us to have humble hearts, Lord, to trust in you always, Amen."

"Time for bed kids." Wilma clapped her hands.

She took the boys by the hands and led them to the outhouse. When they returned a few minutes later, Wilma went to the bedroom and laid blankets on top of the straw, two for the bottom and one for the top. After their bedtime washing routine the boys crawled into bed with Wilma kneeling beside them on the bare floor. After tucking the blankets in and pulling them up just below their chins, the boys sang a Dutch prayer in unison:

I am going to sleep, I am tired. I will close both eyes. Lord watch over this night and over me. Amen

Anna watched Wilma and her children from just inside the doorway, singing their prayers with their soft voices and innocent faces. Serenity filled her. She smiled. 'In four months I will have one of my own,' she thought.

Wilma walked quietly out of the bedroom, softly closing the door.

"Do we really have to clean tonight?" Anna asked, "I am so tired."

"You can go to bed. I still feel strong," Wilma offered. "I can't stand it so I'll clean up before I go to bed."

"Are you sure?" Anna asked.

"Yes, I am sure. Go on," Wilma said as she waved her hand.

"Thank you Wilma. Oh, I guess I'll have to go to that outhouse out back. I don't want to go alone. It's dark. And what about the bears?"

Wilma raised her eyebrows and sighed.

"Snakes?" Anna added.

"Let's go," Wilma said as she left the shed with Anna trailing behind her.

Once outside, Anna looked up at the sky and was surprised at the number of stars in the heavens. She had rarely seen such a clear sky in Holland. They walked through the muddy field straight to the tall outhouse made of thin plywood, with a carving of a heart and a spider web right at eye level.

Anna opened the door and peeked inside. The odor was overwhelming. "Oh I can't," Anna wailed as she stepped back.

"Quiet, you'll wake up the kids," Wilma whispered sharply. "Listen, I can't do it for you and there isn't enough room for two, so just do it. Hurry up."

Anna was in and out in seconds and the two women walked back to the shed in silence.

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Christmas story

THE SIGN: A Christmas Story

Berta Hosmar

"We don't know what to play next," announced five-year-old Michael. And his twin sister Emily added, "Yes, Mommy, we're bored! We already played house and we played school. May we watch a movie? And we really, really need a cookie!"

June looked fondly at her two youngsters and decided that after half a day at kindergarten some quiet time might be a good idea. Besides, after a night of tossing and turning and having bad dreams, she did not have the energy to entertain them herself.

When the twins had happily settled in the playroom and seven-year-old Christopher was diligently practicing his piano lesson in the living room, she made herself a cup of tea and sat down in the kitchen for a well-deserved rest.

It was tremendously rewarding but not always easy to raise a second family at age fifty, she reflected. Her twenty-two year old son Ron was presently serving in Afghanistan as a peacekeeper. When her first husband had passed away after only five years of marriage, mother and son had become very close. Yet Ron had never resented the fact that his mother had remarried when he was thirteen, and he had been thrilled when he became the big brother of Christopher and the twins.

Yes, the twins had been a surprise. At forty-four June had been more than a little apprehensive when she discovered that she was pregnant with twins. Husband John had been delighted and supportive, and after she quit her job to become a stay-at-home mother, they were grateful every day for the riches of their family life.

But ever since Ron had left for service overseas, a nagging, suffocating fear lurked in the back of June's mind and often robbed her of much joy. This would be their first Christmas without Ron. As a parent you had to let go of your adult children, but that did not mean you stopped worrying about them. She realized that serving in Afghanistan was not as dangerous as serving in Iraq, but Ron's job was by no means safe.

Out of a feeling of loyalty, or maybe even kinship with other mothers, she often watched part of the American Newshour with Jim Lehrer. When the anchorman announced solemnly at the end of the hour: "And here, in silence, are six (or any number) more," and the pictures of soldiers killed in Iraq appeared on the T.V. screen, she always breathed a prayer for their families. Many of these boys were so young, some no older than eighteen.

And last night the picture of one soldier, killed in action, had resembled Ron. The likeness had been striking. The young men could have been brothers. The image had haunted her in her sleep, and praying for her son had not brought relief.

If she knew, without a doubt, that Ron, should he ever lose his life while serving his country, would spend eternity in heaven, she might be able to bear the loss eventually. But that was just it: she did not know. Ever since his girlfriend had betrayed him, after months of disbelief and grief, Ron had become bitter. Just before he left, he had told his mother that he had lost his faith.

Her son, who had accepted Jesus at the age of seventeen, now denied his Lord.

"If I believe in anything, I believe in the devil! There is no justice in the world." he had exploded. "Where was God when all those children in that school in Russia were killed? What about the genocide in Sudan? What about the suicide bombers in the Middle East? And what about all those people who drowned during the last few hurricanes? At least I am doing something for others when I go overseas!"

Her sensitive son had voiced the anguish of millions of people all through the ages, and June had experienced her son's outburst as an almost physical pain.

All she could say, while hugging her son, was: "Because of all the horrors you have mentioned, God could not bear the grief of the world either without doing something about it. That's why he came down to live among us and be like us and die for us."

"To give us pie in the sky bye and bye?" Ron had muttered, but June had seen the tears in his eyes.

"Lord, be near my son and make him love you again," she prayed fervently, but then she heard a strange noise coming from the laundry room.

It sounded as if someone was opening and closing the dryer.

"The twins?" She thought as she hurried downstairs.

Sure enough, her offspring were busy wiping the floor and she noticed a pan of water, a facecloth, soap and an empty hamster cage. She yanked the door of the dryer open and after a few seconds their hamster climbed from underneath a few sheets and dizzily tried to escape from his rapidly warming prison.

"You kids may never, ever give the hamster a bath!" She scolded her children. "That poor thing. If you can't take better care of your pet we'll give him to someone else."

Two small, indignant faces looked at her. "But we *were* looking after him," protested Michael. "He walked over our paper when we were finger-painting. We had just let him out of his cage for some freshen hair. His feet were all full of paint, so we washed them off, but then the rest of him got wet too. He always runs around on the wheel in his cage. We thought he might like a ride in the dryer."

"Yes," added Emily, "the movie was boring, and you always say that we need freshen hair and then you send us outside to play. When the hamster is out of his cage, that's outside for him."

"I'll take them to the mall for an hour to see Santa Claus," offered John, coming home from work and still chuckling after hearing the story, but seeing his wife's flushed face.

"Christopher, do you want to come?"

"No way, not with those two kids!" was the cheerful reply, and Christopher went back to his piano playing.

"That boy just loves music," June realized again, as she started to make supper.

But after a while Christopher's banging on the piano and singing at the top of his voice got on her nerves. Her son had stopped practicing and was now playing one of his favorite songs: "Kum-ba-yah my Lord," over and over again.

After listening to "Someone's crying Lord, someone's laughing Lord, someone's singing Lord, Kum-ba-yah," at least twenty times, the endless repetitions drove her crazy and she confronted her son.

"How come you're playing the same song over and over again?" she demanded.

Christopher answered promptly and happily, "Cause I feel like it."

June was at a loss for a reply. Christopher with his rich mind and quick retorts often left her tongue-tied.

Fortunately her son decided that enough was enough. "I'm going to make some more Christmas cards," he announced, and soon the living room table was covered with construction paper and other craft items, and the house was blissfully quiet once more.

June's mind had been busy with her other three children but now the fear for Ron's safety returned with a vengeance. What was the matter with her today? After that horrible nightmare, when she had seen her son being shot at, she just could not get rid of the feeling of doom.

"Lord, please give me a sign that Ron still loves you, and please give me peace," she prayed again.

Wouldn't it be nice if Ron should call for Christmas? But in a recent e-mail he had told his family that he was going on patrol for at least a week, and probably would not be able to contact them, and not to worry, he was fine.

With a heavy heart she set the table, angry with herself for not being able to ban her anxious thoughts and concentrate on her blessings.

But the Lord in mercy and compassion used a seven-year-old boy to assure June of his love. "Mom, look at the card I made for our whole family!" shouted Christopher from the livingroom.

June picked up the folded green sheet. Christopher had not spared the colors and she saw seven stick-like figures. Six figures were arranged around a crude drawing of a box with another small figure in it.

"That is Jesus in the manger," explained Christopher."Those six people are you and dad and Ron and the twins and me."

June's eyes filled with tears. Underneath each figure Christopher had printed the name of that family member. But what struck her as a bolt of lightning and suddenly made her spirit soar were the six arrows Christopher had drawn, coming from the figure in the manger, and pointing to each member of her family, for underneath the figure of Jesus Christopher had printed in big, bold letters: JESUS LOVES ME.

"See, the teacher told us that Christmas really means: *Jesus loves me*, so that's why I printed that. I put Ron closest to the manger cause he is so far away, but there was room in my picture for all of us," Christopher pointed out.

"Here's my sign" whispered June. "I started at the wrong end. I wanted *Ron* to love *you*, but I forgot that it all starts with *you*!"

Christmas story

God's Wink

Beatrice Vandervelde

Johanna stood on a chair by the kitchen table. Carefully she placed a cookie cutter on a large oval of rolled out brown dough.

"Mmmm! That dough smells good," Rosslyn told her. "Gingerbread cookies. Are you going to decorate them?"

"Are we?" Johanna asked, ignoring Rosslyn but looking up at her Mom.

Mrs. Fisher turned to Rosslyn. "Do you have time now? Would you like to help her?"

"Oh, fun." Rosslyn immediately put down her school bag, took off her coat, rolled up her sleeves, and washed her hands at the kitchen sink.

She had been on her way home from school when Mrs. Fisher, a new resident at the housing complex where Rosslyn lived temporarily with her aunt, waylaid her to ask, "Are you available to babysit occasionally?" Rosslyn eagerly nodded yes, and was promptly invited into the apartment to meet the little daughter.

Strange, for things to fall into place like that.

It had dawned on her suddenly last week that if she wanted to buy people gifts for Christmas, she needed money. She'd better find a job. She'd been wondering about it but hadn't done anything. Then, out of the blue....

"First I'll put these shapes on the cookie sheet for you," Rosslyn now told Johanna. With a spatula she carefully lifted the little shapes from the table. "I hope your oven works properly," she said to Mrs. Fisher. "My first cookies here were complete flops."

"What's flops?" Johanna asked.

"They didn't turn out," Rosslyn told her. "They burned black. And it stank something awful." She scrunched her nose.

But Johanna had turned to her mom. "I don't want my cookies to burn, Mommy. I don't want my cookies to burn," she whined.

"Oh, don't worry," Rosslyn quickly told her. "We're going to watch *these* little babies."

Johanna giggled. "They're not babies. They're mommies and daddies."

"Oh! I thought you only had little men. How can we tell which is a mommy and which is a daddy?"

"Don't you know?" Johanna asked with a slight look of exasperation. "The mommies have earrings."

"Oh, of course."

Rosslyn was sure Johanna had it all worked out how they were going to make the earrings so she didn't even ask. She'd wait and see what the little girl had in mind. "I'll roll out this leftover dough," she said when they were out of pieces big enough to make another shape. She pushed all the leftovers into a ball, kneaded them together till they were nice and soft, scattered a bit of flour onto the table, and then rolled the dough out into another large sheet. Again Johanna set to work with her cookie cutter.

"I'm five," she bragged suddenly, looking up at Rosslyn proudly. "I'm big enough for school. Do you go to school?"

"You bet. That's why I have that big bag of books. I was just on my way home."

"I have lots of books. Lots and lots. Mine aren't in bags. Mine are in my book cupboard."

They decorated the cookies with chocolate chips, raisins, extra pieces of dough, and colored sugar. Some cookies only got earrings, but others got vests, mittens, shoes, buttons, and one got two chocolate chips as breasts. "Cause she's a mommy and she has to give chocolate milk to her baby," Johanna said. "Chocolate milk is my favorite."

Mrs. Fisher had withdrawn to the living room to write and address Christmas cards. When she heard they were finished decorating, she returned. "They look good enough to eat right now," she said. "Are you girls sure you want to bake them?" When her daughter nodded very emphatically, Mrs. Fisher popped the sheets into the oven and set the timer.

"Show Rosslyn your room, Johanna," she suggested. Then, turning to Rosslyn, she asked, "Maybe you could read her a story while the cookies bake?"

Johanna led the way. She indeed *did* have dozens of books and couldn't decide which story she wanted Rosslyn to read. Together they finally chose *The Gingerbread Man*. And just when the fox gobbled up the cookie in the story, their gingerbread men were done and Mrs. Fisher called them to come have a taste. After the snack she got out her wallet to pay Rosslyn for her time.

"Oh, I couldn't," Rosslyn said, shaking her head. "I couldn't take money. I didn't do anything."

"Of course you did," Mrs. Fisher assured her. "You entertained Johanna beautifully and we got some delicious cookies in the bargain. We hope to see a lot more of you. How about tomorrow? Are you able to come for an hour or so after school tomorrow? I need to get these cards out."

Rosslyn nodded. After that she seemed to float home. Talk about a cushy job. If that's all there was to babysitting Johanna, she wouldn't mind going there every day.

Awesome, wasn't it? She'd barely thought about it and this job just fell into her lap. "God provides," Aunt D would say. But this? Without her even asking?

What if it was just chance – a case of being in the right place at the right time?

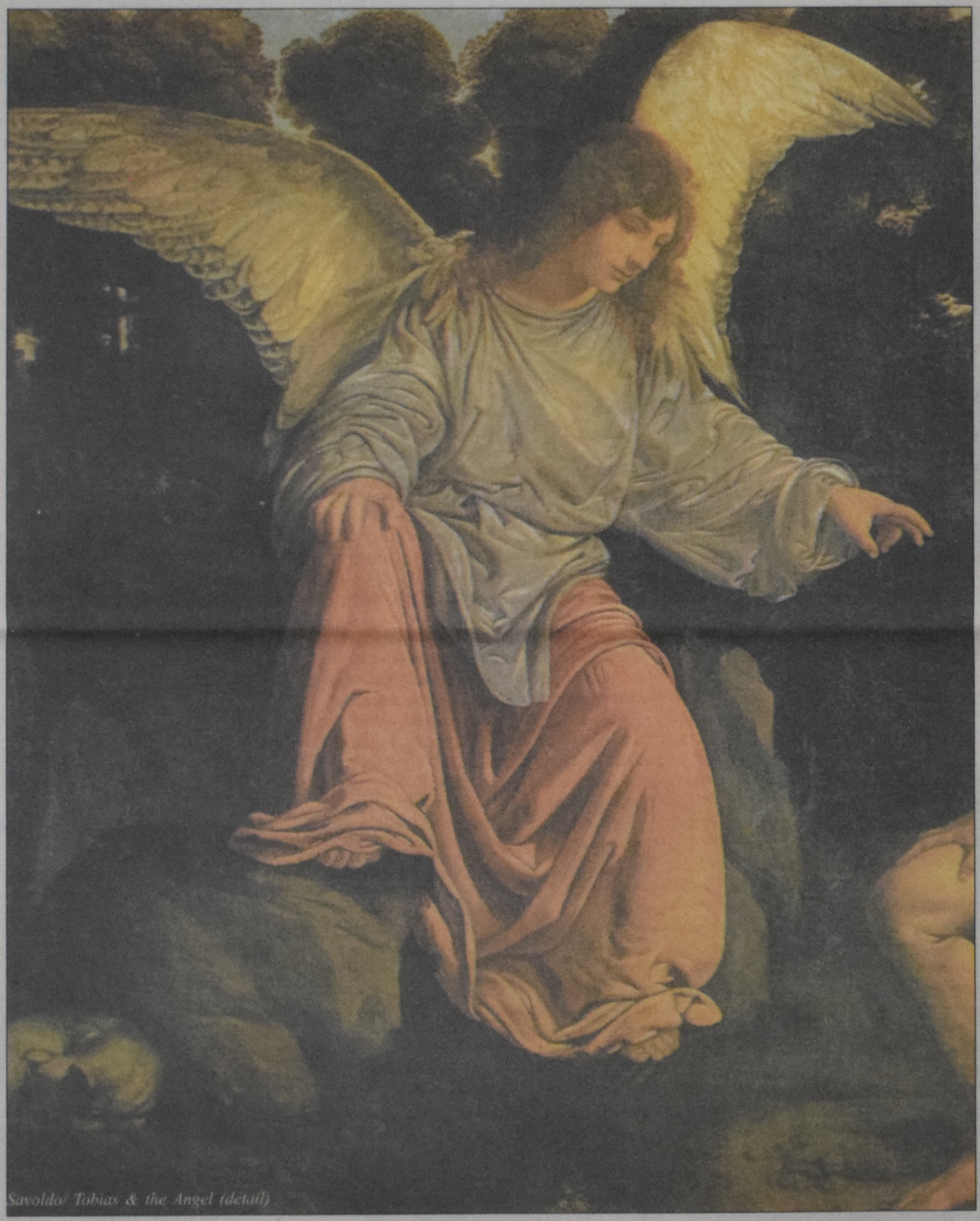
Rosslyn stopped to look up at the darkening sky. A star twinkled.

Was that God's wink?

She laughed out loud at the thought. Imagine!

Christmas

Angel interviews



Savoldo/ Tobias & the Angel (detail)

Gabriel:

...and there was no fear on her face,
nothing of the terror that marred
her cousin Elizabeth's, I'm told,
when her dumbstruck husband
returned home from the temple,
trembling, mute, in a gray sweat.
(Contrary to popular opinion,
angels gossip incessantly about what we
see and hear transpiring in the world
of men and women and children.)
But I began with my usual "Fear Not!"
anyway. To have the client faint away
in fright would be a huge embarrassment.

But this girl just listened gravely,
her huge, clear eyes unfathomable
pools of water waiting to receive
the message dropped so suddenly into
her life from heaven. She received it all
so quietly, I was about to repeat
the words, taking the inward focus
of her gaze for incomprehension,
but it was the dark mystery slowly
taking root and flowering in her soul.
Then she asked her question, to which I
did not know the answer. And momentarily
my mind became a holy blank. But I
had been well rehearsed and spoke
my memorized lines as faultlessly
as a well-trained messenger must.

This giving-birth business that keeps
renewing humanity – every newborn's cry
awaking pain and hope in equal measure –
has sort of become my dubious specialty,
dubious because it's all so bloody
and forever strange to the world of angels.
Humans are so predictably unpredictable.
Who'd have expected Sarah to cover
her mouth like that and then burst
into laughter, as though I'd told
a cosmic joke? Taken aback, I
nearly set the tent afire, something
fortunately not recorded in Scripture.

The next assignment I got was
to sign up that disgraced fellow, Moses.
No, not for my fire-making talents:
Moses was put in my keeping
from the time his mother committed
him to the river and to the Lord's will
rather than surrender his infant life
to Pharaoh's bloody sword.

Mine, too, the divine hand that stayed
Abraham's knife raised aloft
over his passive son, whose eyes
were fixed on his father's face
at that moment eclipsed and aureoled
by the all-effacing sun. Always
mine the mystery, so often stained
with blood – the passionate bond
between father and son, parent and child.

And here in this announcement to
this simple, pious girl preparing
to give herself in marriage,
all those family bonds are cut
asunder, renovven and rejoined
in the cord which in the maiden's
womb will tie forever this frail,
fallen human flesh to the Father,
Creator and Redeemer of heaven
and earth and every generation
born since the human race began.

Do not be afraid, Mary, I said,
you have found favor with God;
and I, too, was favored to speak
the words encapsulating
the very heart of my Lord God,
the Alpha and the Omega,
the Great Lover of mankind.

Henry Tanner/The Annunciation(detail)

Christmas

Galathiel:

You'll have to ask someone
of a higher rank than I, sir,
but I think you're right –
it was the biggest epiphany
of angels ever. Not that we
haven't been on duty all along,
mind you, but we're trained
to go incognito – invisibly.
If we showed up in full regalia
everywhere to interfere or
lend a hand whenever humans
stumbled or fell or cried out,
that would be as subversive
as Satan's calculated trickery.

Never before have we massed
so many squadrons of angels
of all ranks and specialties
and then turned on the candlepower,
blowing open the peaceful
night sky and letting loose
heaven's own musicked radiancy
upon the stunned witnesses
cowering on the hills below.
To be honest, sir, it puzzled
me to discover all that planning,
all that practice and finery,
was spent on a handful of lowly
shepherds who lack all
discipline and credibility.

You're a newspaperman, sir,
one who seeks to influence
the centers of power and culture.
Why stage the most expansive
witness to the greatest event

Benjamin G Cuyp / Annunciation to the Shepherds

that any civilization has seen
where only a few nobodies
were gathered to speak of it?
They couldn't even write!

I'd have marshaled all
my squadrons and artillery
to blow the blinders off
the scholars and sandhedrin
in Jerusalem, or better yet,
off Caesar, his senators
and ranking officers in Rome.
But God's ways are not ours:
hee does not overpower you.
And the path to renewing
the human heart is a long
and tortured detour – right
through God's own heart,
a way obscure to me.

You thought I'd enlighten
you? It was to you, sir,
and yours that the revelation
came, and you were given
prophecies, foreshadowings,
all written down long before.
And now you turn to me,
a mere soldier, for explanation?

Many is the time I commanded
troops of angels to support
unseen the struggles of Israel.
Who do you think orchestrated
the rearguard action against
the mighty Pharaoh's chariots
and horsemen, destroying
them all with the very same
medium that carried Moses
– and earlier Noah – to safety?
Who crossed the Jordan River
with the timid people of God,
and who attacked the walls
of Jericho after weak-kneed
men marched round and round
blowing bugles and raising
a clamor? You were as blind
to us as Balaam on his ass.

Yet, in all this we did
much less than we could have,
being sworn to strict limits.
Like a limited government,
we acted only to enable you.
Since kings and governors –
and even high ecclesiastics –
seldom wait on the spontaneous
bending of the human heart,
it is no accident that God
chose instead to mount his
frontal assault through simple
men like shepherds, fishermen
and an unschooled girl
from Nazareth in Galilee.

But what a show it was,
my friend! I wish you could
have seen and heard it all.
You'd have made a much
better witness....

Kriseis:

It's the job that I enjoyed the most,
although for them it was a long, arduous
and wearying journey – certainly not
the frolic some of your painters
have made it out to be – with chubby
cherubs frolicking in the grass
and spreading a picnic lunch
for Mary, Joseph and a burbling baby.
Serving as bodyguard for the One
who came to defeat the False One,
I had thousands at my beck and call.
After the murderous attempt he made
by playing on Herod's paranoid fear,
we were taking no chances, so I,
the angel of the sword, the slayer
of many thousands by plague, wind,
fire and sword, was assigned the task,
and although I felt the burden, my
heart was filled with holy pride.

But it wasn't the only role I served
in this drama. My comrades and I
cover a vast territory and had most
recently made another long, slow trek
with that caravan of star-gazers
traveling toward Bethlehem from far
eastern kingdoms, heathen lands which
long ago carried the people of Israel
into exile and slavery. Another one
of my comrades, who spelled me
whenever I scouted ahead, recently
returned from Rome, the center
of the Empire, the seat of Caesar.
(Yes, the one who issued the decree
that set the Jews scurrying over hill
and dale to be counted and taxed.)
Together we've amassed thousands
of frequent flyer miles, jet-setting
all over the Mediterranean world,
although we didn't set any records
for speed. Now we were retracing
the journey Israel tramped out long
years ago leading from Egypt's brick-
yards to this land, now grieving with
the mothers of bloody Bethlehem.

Yes, I admit I was eager to strike
back at Satan and his minion Herod,
but that's not why I was sent abroad.
It was my hand that struck down
the first-born sons of Egypt before
the great Exodus began, so I know
the territory and the people there,
and the devils there know me
and fear my commissioned arm.
General of the highways, you might
call me, and although your eyes
may not see it, the traffic shuttling
between these Hebrew crossroads
and Rome and Egypt and Persia
has been furious. Someone with
international political experience
was needed – a three-star Seraphim.

I'm not a mere messenger or bringer
of dreams; I'm licensed to act.
I know the drumbeat of horses' hooves,
the splintering of chariots, the smell
of blood – a very human smell.
Above all I know the smell of fear
and the sound of mothers crying:
it echoes from the beginning of time
to Egypt, Bethlehem and beyond,
and it catches in the throat of this
small squalling infant I'm sworn
to guide to safety in the land
whose very name means bondage.
Do you feel in your mind, your soul,
your heart the sharp edge of the sword?

Angels don't have premonitions,
and we're not privy to the master plan,
but I see battles ahead the like of which
I've never seen before – all focused
on the tender child that suckles now
at that tired young mother's breast.

Durer / Flight into Egypt

Story

Looking for God in a strange land: Advent themes

I. Ko [McGavin's bread and strawberry jam]

The kitchen floor is so cold on his feet, it hurts, so he quickly hops on a chair and sits on the table. Mother would have objected last winter, but she got used to the idea. After the mop froze to the floor a few times overnight, she admitted that the floor was pretty hard on bare feet.

"There was snow on my blankets this morning," he tells mother.

Looking up at him from the stove, where she is just putting on a kettle, she gives him a little smile that he interprets as disbelieving.

"Honest! There was snow all over the blanket next to my face."

"Oh that. That's hoar frost. Your breath freezes on the woolen blanket. It got very cold last night."

Walking over to the water barrel beside the door, she gestures, "Look."

When she lifts the lid, he sees that there's ice floating on top of the water. He quickly reaches in to fish out a piece to suck on.

"Did the milkman come yet?"

The ice reminded him that sometimes when the milk bottles stood too long between the doors, the milk freezes solid and a column of frozen cream pops up out of the top.

"Yes, but I already took the milk inside."

Mother didn't like the milk to freeze solid. She said it changed the flavor, but he didn't notice any difference.

Scurrying back to his perch on the table, he sips the last bit of Father's coffee. Almost as cold as the water in the barrel.

"Why does Father have to go to work so early?"

"He has to take the bus all the way downtown and then transfer to the city bus to get to work. It takes him over an hour and a half, and he has to be there by 8."

Father has only had this job for a few weeks. Before that Ko had always woken up in time to chat with Father before he went off to work – or actually mostly it was looking for work. He hadn't had a steady job for a long time. Nearly a whole year. But when he didn't have work, he still left the house early every morning before Ko went to school to go out job hunting, and usually he didn't get home till supper time.

If he wasn't home by about 5, Mother would say, "Maybe your Father found a job." After a while she had stopped saying it, for often Father would come home late, and it wasn't because he'd found a job but because the bus connections were so poor to the City.

"If you're so cold, Ko, why don't you get dressed?"

"My clothes are too cold. I put them by the stove to warm up first. Can I put the oleo beside the stove too? Otherwise it tears the bread."

"Alright, but don't leave it there too long. Last time it all melted."

"That wasn't last time – that was four days ago."

Mother pauses and gives him a long cold stare.

"Okay, I'll watch it."

Even worse than ice cold linoleum, winter brings rock-hard oleo. There's nothing more frustrating in the morning than dealing with oleo that won't spread and that tears big holes in your bread. Whenever he forgets to soften it, he skips buttering his bread altogether. But then the strawberry jam soaks right through the bread and makes it all soggy. He knows better than to complain about it, however, because Mother will only say, "That's because you put too much on; when I was a little girl...," and then she'd tell how her mother made sandwiches for 12 children with one pat of butter and one teaspoon of sugar. "You were thankful if you got just a few granules of sugar."

One time he'd wisecracked, "I wouldn't be thankful – I don't like sugar sandwiches." And mother had promptly whacked him on the head with the *vaadoek*, the smelly dishrag that was always on the kitchen counter to wipe up spills or crumbs.

And then for the umpteenth time he'd had to listen to the story of how during the war, they were grateful if they could get just a slice of bread without anything on it – no butter, no sugar, no nothing.

It was amazing how often they had been grateful during the war when there had been almost nothing to be grateful for. It was one of his secret thoughts that he enjoyed turning over in his mind. He almost laughed to himself. Grownups have such weird ideas!

He goes to the bread drawer and takes out the long loaf of McGavin's bread. Mr. Manning brought over 4 loaves yesterday in a huge cardboard box. Carefully Ko opens the plastic wrapper and takes out 4 slices and then closes it tightly again. The bread is so soft and white – it's like having cake for breakfast, Mother says. And it's free-for-nothing.

Mr. Manning works at McGavin's bakery and at the end of the week he's allowed to take home the leftover bread that came back in the delivery truck. He used to toss the loaves into the chicken coop for the chickens, but one day Mother asked him if she could please have some to make bread pudding. But the bread was so soft and fresh, they sat around the table eating slice after slice of the day-old bread with sliced apples on top. Dirk must have eaten half a loaf all by himself. It's like a feast, Mother said. That was when Dirk and Nettie were still home. Now Ko sleeps upstairs in the attic all by himself in the special room made by Father. He misses Dirk. Netty too. But Dirk most of all because sometimes it's kind of creepy being up there at night all by himself.

Carefully Ko takes the large golden tin of strawberry jam down out of the cupboard. The first time Mother brought home one of the huge tins from Safeway, Dirk cried, "Look at that: here they sell strawberry jam by the bucket!"

"What a country – a land flowing with milk and honey – and strawberry jam!" shouted Father, throwing up his hands and leaping around the kitchen. That was before he lost his job. He was a lot funnier then.

Ko pries off the lid with his knife and quickly glances at Mother. She's rubbing snow off the window to peer outside into the darkness. Quickly Ko stirs through the big tin to fish for a whole strawberry, something Mother sometimes raps his knuckles for.

Aha! He comes up with a beauty, the biggest one he's ever seen. Now, that's something worth being grateful for. That reminds him: he hasn't prayed yet. Closing his eyes, he thinks, "Thank you for the strawberry God," and quickly opens them again. Yes, it's a beauty!

II. Miep [Scavengers and thieves]

It's such a joy to be able to get out of bed this winter to a house that isn't as cold as an ice-house, she thinks. To have struggled through last year without a gas heater had been foolish. What a lot of work it used to be every morning to get that big old stove hot again and the house warm enough to be liveable.

Funny, it was almost like during the war – but without the anxiety and fear. At first roughing it had been almost exhilarating. Like an adventure. But that giddiness had worn off soon enough.

She'd gotten into the habit of putting on her coat as soon as she got out of bed, and every night she put on a pair of Gerrit's woolen work socks to bed – even though the bed had already been warmed with a couple of hot water bottles. And Gerrit had to get up in the middle of the night to feed the stove. The coal burnt up quickly, he said, because it was not very good.

But at least it had been free.

The landlord had stopped by a few days after they had moved in and brought them a pickup load of coal. When he said it was free, she had hardly been able to believe her eyes. It wasn't at all like the coal they'd bought in Holland, which was shaped like eggs; here it was lumps, chunks and smashed stuff, some if it fine as dust. One piece was bigger than the stove and Gerrit had to hammer it into smaller pieces with the back of an axe. It burned much more quickly than the stuff in Holland and the stove stunk and dirtied the whole house and everything in it. A black greasy film covered everything, it had seeped into every nook and cranny, even into her very soul.

All winter long, though, they had free coal. The landlord had showed Gerrit where to pick it up himself for nothing. This had once been a coal mining town, he told them, and the old mine, now closed, was less than a half mile from their house. It was still surrounded by mountains of coal that had never been hauled away.

The landlord had given him an old wheelbarrow and said just follow the road behind the house; it'll take you right there. The road was little more than twin tracks through the grass and after a short distance it narrowed into a single track that wound through some dense woods. She and Ko had walked along with Gerrit, eager to see the coal mine.

Gerrit had been a bit unsure at first. There were no fences, no signs. Just some old weatherbeaten buildings as gray and dilapidated as their house, a tall wooden tower, chutes, a stretch of narrow railroad tracks with some small coal cars, and rusty machinery scattered here and there. In the trees beside the trail where they

had just emerged stood a couple of old dump trucks without tires, turning rusty. A maple tree sprouted through one of them and the doors were riddled with holes – bullet holes.

Had there been fighting here too? Dreadful scenes from the war leaped up like dark shadows on the edges of her mind as if they had been lurking there all along, but she dispelled them with a shake of her head. Nevertheless, they left her feeling anxious.

"I feel like a thief," said Gerrit. "Surely somebody must own all this."

He was so ... so... timid. No, that wasn't fair of her. He was simply too honest. Even during the war he'd always hesitated about breaking the law. At last she'd exploded, shouting that if he didn't do something she and the kids were going to starve. All it had taken was a decision on his part. After that he'd been bolder than any of his brothers or neighbors, getting firewood and food when others couldn't or didn't dare.

One night he'd come home with torn clothes and covered with mud, looking spooked. When she asked him what had happened, he just shook his head, as if he couldn't speak. Two nights later he'd gone out again, and as she watched him vanish into the darkness, she'd suddenly been filled with a dreadful certainty that she'd never see him again. The Germans would catch him and shoot him, and it would be all her fault.

Strange, she had been so dead sure that it was almost like looking into the future, but she'd been wrong.

Not by much. Gerrit's brother, Dirk, had been caught and had never returned. She'd never had the will to ask him what had happened that night, and he had never told anyone, at least not as far as she knew.

Although he'd never said so, she was sure Gerrit felt responsible. Dien, Dirk's wife, had certainly held him responsible, as if he and his brother had been out just for a lark. One of the reasons Gerrit had been so eager to immigrate, she was sure, was the sense of guilt that he felt over toward his brother's family and toward his own mother and father. He had carried them all through the rest of the war, and after the war he wanted the weight off his shoulders.

As they stood there gazing at the abandoned coal mine and the derelict buildings, Ko had clambered to the top of the nearest coal mountain. Suddenly his high clear shout rang out, and huge chunks of coal came rolling down toward them. They hadn't even needed shovels, and had quickly filled the wheelbarrow with huge jagged chunks of the black stuff. A few weeks later Gerrit had been laid off, and they had been very grateful for their free coal.

Still, from that moment on it was as if the coal was saturated with dark memories of Holland and the war, and all that winter it filled the house with a fine gray haze that gave her headaches.

Going to the window, she rubs away a light layer of frost to look outside. Last winter, the windows had been caked so thickly with dirty ice that she hadn't been able to look out except through the living-room window near the stove. Even now that they have the gas stove, the kitchen windows ice up overnight, but she soon cleared an area the size of a plate.

Although the sun was not yet up, the moonlight seems to make the snow iridescent, as if it is composed not of matter but of light. Even the trees look as if they are etched in crystal and emit an inner light. Tiny ice crystals seem suspended in the air, first one and then another catching the light to suddenly turn into a tiny star. Over the glowing fields and trees millions of tiny stars sift to earth out of the vast darkness, flickering on and off. At one and the same time she is overwhelmed both with a sense of being far, far from everything and a sense of intimacy, closeness, as if this display is for her eyes only.

Her eyes draw it all in deep into herself. It calms and soothes her, healing wounds she didn't even know she had. She wishes she could share this calm with Gerrit. He seems so tense, as if he were a string stretched between then and now, between here and there. He couldn't cut loose, always asking whether he'd done the right thing, reading and rereading the letters from his father, which seem designed to make him squirm with guilt and regret. If only he could just cut the cord and simply be here. Being here is no picnic but it could be good.

Yes, as she gazes out into the shimmering world of snow and trees, she knows that it can be good. It's a world shimmering with promise. Was this how Abraham felt when he gazed up into the star-filled night-sky and God whispered promises to him?

III. Gerrit [Humiliations]

Sitting on the bus, Gerrit smells the crap on his pants. That's what he gets for taking the seat with the heater under it. It's the hot air that brings out the stink, and it does little to warm his feet. In fact, his toes feel colder now than when he was walking the half mile to the bus stop. He sniffs, wondering whether the others can smell him, but this time all he smells is garlic.

Joe, in the seat beside him, reeks of it. Always. So do most of the people on the bus. Ukrainians seem to love garlic and they put it in all their food. Their clothes smell like it and their houses smell like it, so they don't even notice the smell anymore. But the Dutch sure do, and they wrinkle their noses at the Ukrainians.

He wonders whether the Dutch all smell funny to Joe. It seems like half the Ukrainians he knows are called Joe. Maybe the Dutch smell like peppermint to Joe – at least on Sundays and Mondays. But Ren usually smells like herring. He buys it by the barrel from Vander Woude's and even eats it for breakfast. And he came to Canada before the war. You'd think he'd be Canadianized by now.

At first when the Dutch immigrants arrived Ren had pretended not to understand Dutch anymore and had been very brusque with them. But he had gradually softened and now he was even coming to their church, even though they are meeting in a dance hall, have no minister, and the sermons are read by one of the elders – in Dutch. Ren told Gerrit that the dominee in the church he joined when he came here isn't worth a cowpie. He sucks his sermons out of his thumb, and the rest of the week he uses his thumb to sit on. Ren can be pretty crude, but, then, he isn't really Dutch; he's Frisian.

Come to think of it, most of Gerrit's friends are Frisian. He'd grown up with jokes about Frisians, but they were a sturdy, hard-working lot, always ready to give you a helping hand, and they seemed to catch on to the language faster than Hollanders.

Beside him, Joe chatters on and on. He needs no encouragement, and can keep a conversation going all by himself. Ren has learned a lot of English from the man, however, and even more about the ways of Canadians. There are times, though, that he wonders – is he learning about Canadians or just about Ukrainian Canadians? Most of the town is made up of Ukrainian immigrants. They've been living here for a long time, but some of them don't know English any better than the newcomers from Holland. And no wonder: some live like Russian peasants and have contact only with other Ukrainians. The man who lives in the house across the road acts as if he's afraid of people. His house is completely hidden by trees.

When he rumbled past in his old truck the other day, Miep said, "Funny, I didn't even know if he had a wife until almost a year after we moved here." She told Gerrit that his name was Joe, and they had both burst out laughing.

"He must be awfully poor," she had mused one day. "After a good rain, I've seen him drive out to that low spot in his field where the water collects and fill three or four barrels with water and then haul them back to the house. All that work for 80 cents. And they told us that Canada is a rich country...."

Her words had made his stomach cramp. At the time he hadn't had steady work for several months already, and he would gladly have filled water barrels for 80 cents apiece. He hadn't been able to pay the rent two months in a row. He hadn't told Miep, however. The landlord was a good egg. "Pay me when you get a job," he said when Gerrit told him he didn't have the money. "You've done so much fixing on that old house – I should be paying you."

Now he was slowly paying the landlord, Mr. Manning, back by paying ten dollars more every two weeks. "You sure you can afford it?" Manning asked when he added another ten to the forty dollars rent. When he left, he was a little tipsy from the two whiskeys Manning had poured him and he was carrying a chicken, already plucked and cleaned.

"You should build yourself a chicken coop," Manning had suggested, clapping him on the shoulder. "Nothing like fresh eggs and fried chicken, Gary. The kids can tend the chickens. No work at all."

Right. Manning was a good-hearted fellow, who, judging from the girth of his huge belly and the color of his nose, liked food and drink a little too much. His wife was the one who did all the work around the house. She always wore pants, too, and last summer she even climbed onto the roof to patch in some new cedar shingles. She was the one who raised chickens, chopped off their heads and cleaned them. And Manning played the big man by giving them away. Canadians sure have strange ways.

Joe nudges him out of his reverie: "I think you got poop on your pants," he whispers loudly, pointing to a spot on his pants.

Gerrit winces in embarrassment and digs in his pocket for a tissue. No-one has any tact here. He thought he'd wiped it all off with snow after the stuff had splashed back on him when he was emptying the toilet pail this morning before going to work. He hadn't

Story

Looking for God in a strange land: Advent themes *(continued)*

had time to change, afraid that he would miss the bus. The next one didn't come for another hour.

He hadn't figured that life in this new country would bring so many humiliations. And it was the small ones that often hurt the most, taking the wind right out of your sails. The idea of immigrating had lodged in his mind before the war already, but it had seemed large and heroic. Instead, it consisted mostly of small humiliations. Not knowing the words. Being called a dumb deepee. Getting fired because you didn't understand orders. Now, going to work with shit on your pants and having a Ukrainian point it out to you.

"I built a toilet in the basement and when I emptied the pail this morning it splashed on me. I thought I wiped it all off...."

Joe immediately began asking questions about the toilet's construction, finally handing him a piece of paper and a pencil stub so he could draw it out for him.

"It's a good idea, you know. We got pots in all the bedrooms. But with six kids you always got trouble. Nobody wants to empty them. They fight because somebody's peeking or somebody tips the pot. I got one girl, you know, she always goes to the outhouse – even when it's thirty below. My wife, she's the opposite. She says she can't go when the seat in the outhouse is too cold.

"My cousin moved to the city two years ago. He's got a bathroom in the house. Whenever he comes over, he talks about his bathroom. And afterward my wife talks about it too. He thinks he's a big shot just because he got a toilet in the house."

He studies the drawing. "Maybe I'll make one in the basement too. You know, my basement doesn't have a floor in it. I could just dig a deep hole in the basement. I wouldn't have a pail to empty every day. My wife would be so happy, maybe she stops calling me —" Joe says something in Ukrainian, Gerrit doesn't understand. "You don't know what it means, eh? Good. I don't tell you."

Joe elbows him and giggles, and suddenly Gerrit finds himself shaking with laughter. Here he sits, thousands of kilometres from home, bouncing around in a rickety old bus beside a Ukrainian who reeks of garlic and he himself stinking even worse, talking about toilets. If his brothers could see him now.

Gerrit looks out the bus window still chuckling to himself. The sky, which was slowly beginning to grow lighter, now grows darker as it begins to snow harder. The fine snow swirls in the bus's headlights in great white arabesques, swirling veils, swooping earthward and then curling upward again in musical rhythms. The wind is playing melodies – a silent hymn composed of blowing snow sweeping in and out of the darkness.

It is a ghostly landscape he's traveling through, ghosts sweeping from the past and being devoured by new ghosts that the wind blows from the vast open spaces of this limitless land, so limitless it sometimes fills him with dread.

His dreams are of warm, cozy living rooms filled with his brothers doing homework and his sisters sewing, father bent toward the lamp reading his book and mother sitting near the window staring out into the night. And he's not with them but seeing them all from another dimension, as if from the darkness of the grave. Even as he struggles toward them, he finds himself falling away, and they seem completely unaware of his absence. The dreams haunt him far into the day, plaguing him with a deep sense of regret and futility.

His laughter catches in his throat. The bus shudders to a halt and the people slowly uncoil themselves from their seats, still sluggish with dreams and heavy with thick winter clothing. They are here – in the City. As his fellow commuters stumble off into the swirling snow, hugging themselves against the cold, they remind Gerrit of nothing more than sheep, wayward, lost sheep dumbly scattering into a gray world.

IV. Ko [Strange world]

It's snowing – a fine crystal snow, not the slow, lazy flakes of a few days ago, but wind-driven particles that sting when they hit Ko's face. He pulls up his scarf a little higher and holds the back of his mittens to his face. They are lined with rabbit fur and quickly draw the sting out of his cheekbones.

For almost a week the air has been so still and clear, sometimes he'd go stand outside in his shirtsleeves and turn his face to the sky – a sky so high and so blue he felt as if he were being drawn up into its foreverness. Even though it was zero degrees, you didn't need a coat – if you didn't stay out too long. Mother kept an eye on him, always afraid he'd freeze something and it would fall off.

"Remember," she'd say, "just because it's zero doesn't mean it's not freezing. It's actually 20 degrees below freezing."

He knew that, but she was always multiplying and dividing to figure out what the Canadian measurements meant. Her measuring cups and spoons and her scales were Dutch. In Canada everything was different, she said with a sigh. Even the cold was different. In Holland if it was zero degrees, you couldn't go out in your shirtsleeves. You'd freeze your buns off, she said.

Duggan, whose father worked up North – way up North among the Eskimos – said that up there they would walk around outside in their undershirts even when it was 20 below zero. He didn't believe Duggan. Duggan often told lies. So did all the kids that lived near the gravel pits and the river. Except Melanie, and she never told lies because she hardly ever said anything at all. But Duggan usually told you later that he'd been lying, so that wasn't really like lying for real.

Ko told Duggan that God doesn't like liars, something the fat lady at the Gospel Lighthouse liked to say – often. But Duggan had looked at him as if he were nuts.

"Sure God likes liars," he declared as if it were something everyone knew. "God loves sinners, our preacher says, so God loves liars. He loves everybody."

That settled that. Ko thought he should say something back, but he couldn't think what. Still, Duggan's answer irked him, so he said, "When I lie my mother washes my mouth out with soap."

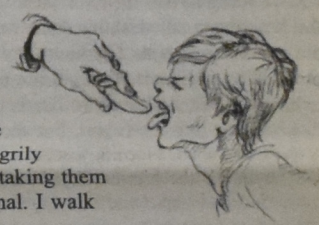
Duggan shook his head. "That's not fair. Soap is for when you say shit or ...," and he rattled off a long list of words that merited the soap treatment. "My mother buys Ivory Soap," he concluded. "I like Ivory Soap."

Ko didn't know what kind of soap his mother bought, but he figured he wouldn't like any kind. He had licked a bar of soap once just in case, and he hadn't liked it at all. Although Mother often threatened to wash out his mouth with soap, she had never yet done it.

Father never threatened. He just smacked you or punched your shoulder. But, although Ko feared Father's punishment the most, none of Father's blows really hurt, not like Mother's. She had a mighty arm. Like God.

Today he was wearing so many layers of clothes, even if Mother whacked him with the bamboo *matteklopper* he wouldn't feel a thing. In Holland the *matteklopper* was used for beating out the rugs, but here there was so much dirt, Mother said, if you tried to keep up you could beat the rugs until your arm fell off.

Besides his longjohns and jeans, he is also still wearing his flannel pyjama pants. He feels lumpy and clumsy. When he first started out, he'd turned back before he got to the road and angrily told his mother, "I'm taking them off. I can't walk normal. I walk like I shit my pants."



"If you say that word again, I'll wash your mouth out with soap," Mother said firmly. "You're keeping them on. If you don't, you'll freeze your bum and your buns will fall off."

Then she turned him around and shoved him back out the door. He almost tumbled down the steps.

He considered turning around and telling Mother she should have her mouth washed out with soap for saying bum. But after a moment's reflection, during which he thought of the *matteklopper*, he started off across the field again following the narrow path trampled in the snow.

It is Saturday, and this morning he is going to Duggan's house way down by the river. Duggan promised to show him pictures that his father took up North, where he's working on the Do-line. It was to keep the Russians from invading Canada, said Duggan. Ko imagined it as a huge wall like the Great Wall of China. The Chinamen built that to keep out the Russians his teacher, Miss Murchuck, told them. She tacked up a picture of the Great Wall of China that she had cut from the *National Geographic* on the bulletin board.

Ko had pictures from the *National Geographic* tacked up in his bedroom in the attic too – to cover the McGavin's name emblazoned on the cardboard boxes that Father had used to make the walls. During the summer he and Duggan scoured the City Dump every week after the City garbage trucks came to look for stuff. While Duggan looked for building materials, Ko always looked for National Geographics. He hoped to find another one with a big map in it.

Duggan, Ko, and some of Duggan's other friends had built a two-room hut in the woods behind Duggan's house. In the summer they sometimes slept in it, something he never told Mother – he just told her he was sleeping over at Duggan's house. And it was Duggan's

Story

house, wasn't it? The hut was a wreck now. It had caught fire from the stove they had made from a barrel. They had scrambled out in the nick of time. Fred had quickly kicked down one of the walls and they had managed to put out the fire by tossing armfuls of snow on it. It wasn't a total loss, though; one room had been saved.

Today they were planning to wrap the whole thing with snow. It was Duggan's idea. He read – in one of Ko's *National Geographics* – that you could warm an igloo with a candle because the snow keeps the heat inside. Their hut would become an igloo and they would live like Eskimos.

For about half a mile or so there were no trees or houses along this stretch of road that Ko is walking. The field was plowed so the snow blows so thickly here that sometimes he walks backwards to keep the snow out of his eyes. As he turns he sees something coming across the white fields toward him -- a large animal. It almost disappears in the snow at times because it, too, is white. If it weren't for its face he would have missed it entirely. Ko stops. Head held low, the creature bobs across the field, aiming straight at him. Ko hurries forward down the deserted road, wishing there were houses nearby, but the creature alters its course to intercept him. Freezing in place, Ko watches it slowly draw closer at the same unhurried pace. Is it a polar bear?

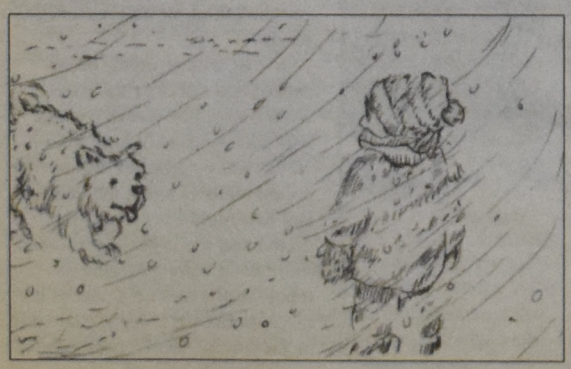
When the snow lets up for a moment, he gets a better look. It's a wolf. No, not a wolf – it's bigger, rounder, it's huge. It's the biggest dog he's ever seen.

As it crosses the ditch beside the road, it doesn't change its pace, it doesn't growl or bark or hesitate, it just keeps coming straight toward him. Stopping in front of Ko, the white creature rises up on its hind legs and puts its huge paws, the size of bear paws, on his shoulders, almost knocking him over.

On its hind legs it is taller than Ko. Its black nose is only inches away from Ko's and his breath mingles with Ko's breath. Its eyes are black and they gaze into Ko's eyes. They study him, a long, lingering study, and they are filled with kindness and mercy.

Ko wants to pet the huge animal but its weight is such that he cannot lift his arms. At last it lowers itself to the ground and before Ko can gather his thoughts it has disappeared into the whirling snow – like a ghost.

Ko staggers to the side of the road and sinks to his knees in the snow, which grows thicker, swallowing him up in its whiteness, turning him white as the creature. He opens his mouth wide to catch the snow on his tongue and suddenly he is filled with happiness. Flopping onto his back, he lies face-up in the snow and with snow beneath him, snow around him and snow above him, he smiles and thinks, "Thank you!" He is here and he is glad he is here.



V. Gerrit [Stars, darkness and crossings]

Gerrit is beginning to regret his decision to walk downtown from work. When the weather was good, he often walked to save the bus fare, even though he sometimes wondered whether he wasn't wearing out more in shoe leather than he was saving. The snow, the first big snowfall of the season, tempted him. This morning it had filled him with melancholy, as if it were threatening to erase something. As the day wore on, and he had to go out to shovel the sidewalks around his building several times, his spirit gradually transmuted into a boyish sense of excitement, the sort of excitement he'd felt as a boy in Holland when it looked as if school would be canceled and they could go skating on the canals.

He loves walking through this neighborhood. It is such a contrast to his own. Here the streets are paved and there are sidewalks and in the summer people cut the grass in front of their houses. And the houses are large, many two stories, and some even made of brick like in Holland. Most of the houses in Beverly look like shacks compared to these beautiful homes. After the landlord tacked tarpaper to the sides of the house where a veranda had been – with wooden slats of various lengths nailed every which way to hold it on – Miep had looked at the house and laughed. But now she was wondering whether Manning was ever going to stucco it as he'd promised.

Gerrit wonders what it's like to live in such a grand house and not have to worry about paying rent. Here and there people have fastened colored lights to doorways or to an evergreen tree in the front yard. He had looked them over in Woodward's and had considered buying a set that came with 20 little lamps in 4 colors, but he wasn't sure Miep would approve. She came from a family that judged such displays pagan. Besides, they cost almost 4 dollars.

The snow rattles on the hood of his parka like rain on the roof of a shed. The canvas material magnifies the sound in his ears. But the snow doesn't stick to his clothes the way it does in Holland; it just bounces off. Sometimes, however, it has a way of curling around the visor of his cap to seek out his eyes and then it sticks to his eyelashes. Cold trickles down across his collar bone. Some of the blowing snow has found its way inside his scarf, where it is melting. Pulling his scarf tighter around his neck, he lowers his head into the thick flurries. Here the wind is much stronger as it is channeled down the valley of the North Saskatchewan River.

He reflects on the events of his day. Usually he works only till noon on Saturdays, but now it is dark already. Miep will be worried. He feels a twinge of guilt, for it's the first he's thought of her today.

The flat the army officer moved out of yesterday had to be cleaned this morning so a professor from the nearby university could move in. It was an unbelievable mess, and his heart sank. He saw that there was no way he'd get it cleaned up in time. Yesterday, he told the superintendent Cobb that letting the professor move in right away was not a good idea, but the man just shrugged.

A couple of hours after he'd started, as he was struggling to put the venetian blinds back up over the living room window – he'd washed them in the bathtub – suddenly he had a helper. An unshaved, unkempt fellow in overalls seized the other end of the blinds just as he was on the verge of dropping the awkward thing. Then the man started hauling garbage downstairs to the back alley. Gerrit figured the superintendent had sent him a helper, so he began giving the fellow instructions, and they'd worked together till the coffee break. Since the man didn't seem to have a thermos with him, Gerrit shared his coffee as they sat side by side on the living room floor, puffing from their exertions.

"I'm sure glad Cobb sent someone to help," he said to the man. "There's a professor moving in this afternoon, and I'd never have gotten the place ready all by myself."

The man smiled. "Cobb didn't send me. I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself – I'm the professor you've been getting ready for." He held out his hand. "My name is Richard Rhodes."

As he shook hands with the professor, Gerrit was so dumbfounded, it must have showed on his face, for the man threw back his head and laughed.

"Excuse me, Professor Doctor, I thought, I thought.... Well, you don't look like a professor; I thought you were just an ordinary man like me."

This brought forth more laughter. "Well, it's true that some professors think they are not ordinary mortals. Most of us, however, are quite ordinary. In fact, maybe because we scientists have eaten more of the tree of knowledge, we are more corrupted by pride than most."

"Oh no," protested Gerrit. "In Holland a professor would not help a caretaker. He would be wearing a suit and he wouldn't want to make his hands dirty...." Gerrit realized he hadn't yet said his name. "My name is Gerrit vander Straat."

They shook hands once more. The realization that he was sitting on the floor beside a professor whom he had just been bossing around as if he were his helper suddenly rendered him mute. For a few minutes they sat in silence sipping their coffee and nibbling the cookies Miep had made. Of all mornings to have picked out the ones that were slightly burnt.

"How long ago did you come from Holland?" Rhodes asked.

"About two and one half years ago."

"Your English is pretty good."

"I took lessons in Holland for two years before we came."

"Were you a caretaker in Holland, too?"

"No. I was an electrician and I had a store. Radios, lamps, washing machines – all sorts of electrical things."

"A hardware store."

"Yes, that's it – a hardware store...."

And that was how the conversation had started. He had told the man all sorts of things he'd never told anyone before, and Rhodes listened and nodded and kept asking questions. Before he knew it, a couple of hours had passed and suddenly the moving van was at the door.

Since he'd wasted so much time talking, he pitched in to help the professor move. The man didn't have much furniture, but Gerrit lugged box after box of books up two flights of stairs, and now he can feel it in his legs, especially in his thighs. But the long walk through town should loosen them up a bit.

The snow has stopped when he reaches the High Level Bridge spanning the river, and before he's halfway across the sky clears and he can see the stars. He stops in the middle of the bridge to look. In the distance is the lighted dome of the Parliament Buildings and straight above them, high in the night sky, one star twinkles with a peculiar reddish brilliance.

Story

Looking for God in a strange land: Advent themes *(continued)*

You're in the wrong place, star, he thinks to himself. Once, tired from walking all over town looking for work, he had stopped at the Parliament Buildings. To his surprise, he'd been able to walk in unchallenged. After watching the workings of government from the balcony, he was under no illusions that the star in the sky was the one associated with wise men.

He'd always thought a red star was particularly hot, but the professor had explained to him that, on the contrary, it was the blue ones that were the hot ones. With the naked eye, it is hard to tell which ones are blue and which red or yellow. Rhodes was an astronomer. He'd recently come to Canada from the United States. When he was working down there in an observatory, he told Gerrit, they had seen a new star suddenly appear in the sky. He had witnessed the birth of a star.

Gerrit's mind was awhirl with all the things Rhodes told him. He'd never thought of stars being born. He always just assumed that they had been created by God at the beginning and would still be up there at the end of time. One thing Rhodes told him had especially struck him: the star-birth Rhodes had watched had happened billions of miles away and the light from that star took tens of thousands of years to reach the earth. So the astronomers had been watching something that happened tens of thousands of years ago. They were looking into the past.

And as Gerrit stands here in this strange vast country on a bridge over a river that flows all the way across the entire country, he too is looking far into the past.

Perhaps right now he's looking back to the very beginning of time, when God is saying, "Let there be... Let there be...."

The thought makes his head spin. A large truck thunders by and makes the bridge sway so he clutches the rail, seized by vertigo. The entire bridge suddenly seems to have become unanchored and feels as if it's falling sideways, plummeting silently through the darkness into the black abyss of the river below. His heart pounds violently and suddenly he finds himself sweating and nauseous.

With a sickening vividness he relives the summer evening he stood on this same bridge looking down into the river. Then the black water rushing below had seized on his mind and had almost seduced him. He had not worked for 4 months, and the consistory had learned that he'd been fired for theft of company property. When that pompous jackass Poortinga and his silent partner Vander Net came to the house to tell him he was barred from the Lord's Supper "until the matter was settled," Miep had been so shocked, she had run into the bedroom and hadn't come out until the men left.

He had never told her why he'd been fired. Why should he? It had all been a misunderstanding. Over a pound of butter that he was taking home in his lunchkit.

All the men took home butter for their own families. He thought it was just one of the extras that came with the job. The regular foreman had never said otherwise, but that day he was home sick, and one of the guys in a white shirt and tie was supervisor. As everyone was getting dressed to go home at the end of the day, Gerrit opened his lunchkit just as the boss was passing; suddenly he pointed to the pound of butter in it and started shouting. Some of the men started shouting back at him and it had turned into a loud melee, the boss getting pushed around by some angry men. The only one who had been fired was Gerrit.

He had just sat there like a stupid sheep struck dumb unable to say a word on his own behalf. The idea that someone would look on him as a thief so shocked him suddenly it was as if he were looking at himself from the outside and seeing someone else. He had hardly been able to muster the strength to walk to the bus. For weeks afterward the scene kept replaying itself in his mind over and over again, and every time it turned his insides sour.

Four months later, despite going out every day, he still had not found a steady job. He was so very, very tired. Every cell and atom in his body wanted to quit. It was late, a dark day, and he knew he was too late for the bus and would have to wait in the Bus Depot among the drunks and derelicts for an hour.

And then he found himself standing on the bridge looking down at the black water below, and it had sucked on him almost pulling him off the bridge. It would have been so easy to surrender. The water spoke to him of rest, comfort, resolution. Miep and the kids hadn't even entered his mind. It was just him and the everflowing river. Then, too, it had seemed as if the bridge and the whole world were tilting, tilting toward the cool comfort of death.

As he stood at the railing staring down into the water far below, however, something had suddenly come bobbing into view. It looked like a basket, a wicker basket like the one that had carried Moses. As it passed below the bridge, he ran to the opposite side to see it again, gripped by the absurd notion that there might be a baby in it. But when it emerged on the other side, it turned out to be nothing but a piece of driftwood.

Deceived again, he thought to himself, laughing at his own silliness. But the spell of the river had been broken. For weeks afterward, though, he had not crossed the bridge on foot again.

But in recent months he had crossed this bridge many times without thinking of that dark night of the soul. Perhaps it was looking up at the stars, the stars which Rhodes said reminded him of the eternal comfort of death....

Rhodes had been a soldier. At one point, after slogging across Europe for a year, killing and seeing his comrades killed, he had become separated from his unit. Utterly exhausted, he'd fallen asleep in a depression behind a hedgerow. Waking up in the middle of the night, he'd been overcome by despair and guilt, guilt for all the killing he'd done and all those who had been killed beside him, and he'd been overwhelmed by the senselessness and futility of it all. He couldn't think of any reason to go on.

It was a clear night, he recalled, and for once the guns were silent. For weeks the sky had been overcast, dark, heavy clouds hanging on the top of the polled willows along the canals. But that night the clouds had parted and the night sky showed millions of stars glittering serenely in the darkness. As he lay there on his back staring upward at the steady abiding lights above

him, slowly the steadiness of the stars communicated itself to him, and was infused with a sense of order and abiding meaning. "It had nothing to do with what I – what the generals and the nations were doing. It was a sense that there was an abiding order that continues no matter what," Rhodes said.

"That's what led me to become an astronomer -- looking for meaning in the stars." He was silent for a while, remembering. Gerrit thought he should say something about God and Jesus, but it seemed wrong to break the silence.

"The stars don't tell you a dumb thing, of course. Not a single one of the big questions was ever answered by science – except with shallow answers.... There is no wisdom in any scientist or professor, Gerrit, that isn't also in you."

Rhodes called him by his Dutch name, not Gary.

"Like you, I too am running away from home. But I left my wife and kid behind in California. Any place can become a prison and then somewhere else looks promising. We chase after stars. And they turn out to be the same stars that shone on us at home. But, then, what would the world be without stars?"

He had told Rhodes, who had treated him to lunch, that sometimes he wondered whether he had emigrated to Canada because he wanted to run away from home. It was something he'd never admitted to Miep. In Holland he had felt chained down a dozen different ways. And the day the Hoek of Holland disappeared below the horizon had felt to him like the day Holland had been liberated from the Nazis. Well, maybe not quite. But almost. A new beginning as full of promise as Isaiah's visions of a new day.

* * * *

The bus is crowded with people carrying shopping bags and packages. Canadians sure spend a lot on presents at Christmas. He and Miep had intended to celebrate Sinterklaas on December 5 like in Holland, but he hadn't yet been able to finish the miniature barn, part of the farm he was making for Ko. He had also bought a few tiny cows, sheep and horses to put in the barn and shed, as well as a few bow-legged cowboys to put on the horses.

He also has his eye on a used gas stove. It is old, but it's a beauty, lots of chrome, and the man is asking only $20, a bargain said Manning, who had learned of it. The oven in the old stove that Manning gave them doesn't work properly. Miep wept the last time she made cookies: half of them were black. He ate them anyway to show they weren't really burnt, but he felt heroic doing it.

Once he made a joke about burnt offerings, but it hadn't gone over too well. He and Miep had ended up shouting at each other – until they had both seen Ko watching them, face aghast. They had quickly tried to act normal, but that was when he resolved to look for a new stove and had asked Manning to keep an eye out.

Getting off the bus in front of the Drake Hotel, which swallows half the men who had been riding the bus, he still has a long lonely walk home. But it's a still, bright night, and he enjoys the walk.

About halfway down the shortcut that angles across a couple of vacant fields, he pauses to catch his breath. He should have anticipated that the path trampled through the snow had been blown over and would be hard slogging. The deep snow has already developed a hard crust that hurts his shins. He would have been smarter to stick to the road. There most of the snow had been blown off by the wind -- and ended up here.

What a magnificent sky tonight. In the northeast a great flowing, flickering banner seems to be unfurling in the sky, fluctuating from green to yellow to shades in between. It looks like a huge wing undulating as it spreads eastward over the river valley. Then another wing begins to unfold westward. Now more colors appear – red and purple and violet.

Suddenly the play of northern lights flashes closer, hovering right overhead, and the two wings coil around to meet behind him, encompassing the entire night sky with sheets of dancing rays that shoot earthward and then retract again to emerge tinged with new colors, every color in the rainbow, hundreds of shredded rainbows draping earthward from a hole in the center. He is standing in a cosmic teepee formed from veils of light. Straight overhead is a dark circle from which the stars have been erased so it looks like an infinite hole, a hole into heaven from which the colors pour in ever-changing hues.

Just as suddenly as it came it is gone, and Gerrit is left standing in the middle of the snowy field feeling very, very small. He looks around to orient himself, his eyes dazzled by the display. It is as if he is seeing the fields and the woods and the distant houses anew, as if he has been shown something. But he isn't sure what.

Shaking himself, he plunges ahead through the deep snow, hurrying to tell Miep what he has seen so they can marvel at it together.

To be continued next issue.

Keeping the Christmas stress manageable and the holidays meaningful

Simplicity is key to making the holidays enjoyable for all

Lisa M. Petsche

The Christmas season is a hectic time for many people, due to the preparations and festivities that typically take place. Staying sane, not to mention enjoying this special time of year, is even more challenging, though, when you're the parent of an infant or toddler – a labor-intensive role at the best of times.

Follow these suggestions to keep stress manageable and the holidays meaningful.

Gift giving

- Reconsider the number of people you buy for as well as the amount you spend on each of them. Especially resist the urge to go overboard with gifts for your child(ren). Set a budget and stick to it.

- Consider mail order shopping and, if finances allow, pay the extra cost for gift wrapping.

- For traditional shopping, arrange child care so you can go solo. Peruse store flyers first, and prepare a list. Plan one or two major outings rather than numerous small ones. Whenever possible, have gifts wrapped in-store or at a mall's customer service center.

- For do-it-yourself wrapping, choose decorative gift bags and boxes so you don't have to wrestle with rolls of paper, tape or ribbon.

- To save even more time and eliminate having to make returns, purchase gift certificates – for a major department store or bookstore chain, for example.

- Keep presents out of sight until it's time to exchange them.

Decorating

- Since you have to collect and pack away decorations later, be selective about what you display. And of course, always keep your little one's safety a priority (for example, avoid ornaments that are breakable or contain small parts).

- Don't decorate too far in advance of festivities, since toddlers are easily overstimulated and don't understand the concept of time.

Entertaining

- If finances allow, arrange for a housecleaning to save time and energy.

- If you plan to host a dinner, keep the menu simple. Prepare dishes ahead of time and freeze them, or buy prepared food from your local deli or bakery. A potluck meal is another sanity-saving idea.

- If the thought of having dinner guests is too stressful, invite people over for dessert and coffee instead.

- If you normally do a lot of entertaining, condense it into an open house one afternoon or evening. Have the food catered and rent dishes, to cut down on cleanup afterwards. Arrange for a child minder during the event, so you can concentrate on hosting duties and mingle with guests.

Visiting

- If you're invited to a home you know is not toddler-friendly, suggest that visiting take place at your home instead.

- For dinner invitations, bring your toddler's preferred foods and beverages if you're not sure what's on the menu, or if it's something he/she dislikes or has never tried. Recognize that when kids are excited, as is the case during Christmas festivities, they don't eat as well as they normally would.

- Take along adapted dishes and utensils, a bib or apron, extra diapers or training pants, a change of clothes and a few of your child's favorite toys.

- For car trips, bring comfort items such as a cherished blanket, doll or stuffed animal, snacks and drinks, and favorite music or books on tape.

Further Tips

- Lower your expectations, and be prepared to modify or forego traditions that are no longer practical. Now is the time to start some family traditions of your own.

- Keep plans simple, and let relatives and friends know your needs and limitations. Decide what is most important to your family, focus on it and forget the rest. Ensure your celebration of Christmas emphasizes that "Jesus is the reason for the season."

- Whatever seasonal tasks you decide to take on, ask for help and delegate responsibilities to your spouse and any older children. Make plans and start necessary preparations well in advance. Devise lists to stay organized.

- Space out activities as much as possible, scheduling quiet days in between busy ones. Stick as closely as possible to your little one's schedule, especially eating and sleeping times.

- Attend a family worship service geared to young children.

- Share special Christmas memories with your toddler. Bring out photo albums or home movies, and play favorite carols.

- Look after your health: get adequate rest, don't over-indulge in holiday foods and try to fit in some exercise (perhaps evening family walks around the neighborhood to admire decorations).

- Find something relaxing you can do to give yourself a daily break, even for 15 minutes – for example, quietly enjoying a cup of tea, journaling, reading something uplifting, or listening to music. Make it a priority to continue this time for yourself in the new year.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three and a freelance journalist specializing in family life.

Reflection

The birth of Christ the Lord and life in the Kingdom

A.A. van Ruler

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

Right from the time of his birth Jesus is called Lord and Savior in the Gospels. These and similar terms were borrowed from the political thought world of the Roman Empire. And it was from this world that they also derived their peculiar tone and hue. In the city of Rome, Caesar and the state he represented were also seen as Lord and Savior. People looked to the political organization imposed on the nations by Rome as the source of authority and well-being (salvation).

This is the audacity of the Gospel and of the early church: by using these terms, they made this powerful declaration: "We know the true Lord and the genuine authority; we know the true Savior and genuine well-being (salvation)." This is why in the first centuries Christianity was a revolutionary force in political life, until in the fourth century the state and Caesar came to recognize this Lord and Savior.

Since that time, the great spiritual struggle to embody in the public life of the people this acknowledgment of Jesus Christ by the state has ebbed and waned. It has been tried in a thousand different ways and has encountered many failures and disappointments. The rich and varied history of Europe has been shaped by it and it has put its stamp on the lives of its people. And we see other parts of the world beginning to participate in this way of life, for example, in and through the United Nations.

Majestically enthroned Caesar issues orders to his many officials to take the census of his empire, while below Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem to be enrolled according to his decree. The picture is structured like the icons in which the Lord occupies the place of Caesar. The painting brings home the irony of the earthly emperor who seems to exercise power and the lowly babe about to be born who by his humiliation is raised to reign in heaven as King of kings.

Righteousness and love

It is hard to maintain that these developments are contrary to the original intentions of the Gospel. The New Testament itself understood the coming, the person and the work of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of Old Testament expectations. Jesus is indeed the Messiah. And the Messiah is essentially, in the O.T. sense, the king. However, this kingship is not in the first place about the king but about the communal life of the people around him. The king is the servant of God and the shepherd of the people.

This, according to the O.T., is God's intention: that the people live in a community characterized by righteousness and love so that the being of God is mirrored in it. Man is the image of God also in his social relationships and in the way he organizes his society. This is what the Lord God called and appointed Israel for: to image God and so be an example to the nations. According to the O.T., the point is the brotherhood of all peoples on the basis of the acknowledgment, praise and service of the one and only true God.

And according to the New Testament this is what God does: after all the failures in the history of Israel, at last the true king has come who will serve God faithfully and lead his people in truth. Now the kingdom of God has been inaugurated on earth and is near to us. That's why there is now peace on earth, that is, a space in which life can prosper. It prevails through his full acceptance of suffering and through his sacrifice and death. The cross is the tree of life.

Through the coming of Christ, new courage and new expectations are born – courage and expectations over toward the world. This is why the apostles went out. This is why the early Christians were the "third generation." They no longer lived in submission like the Jews or in despair or pride like the heathen; they lived in the kingdom of God. This new expectation is an essential element in fulfilment. The fact that in Jesus Christ everything is fulfilled also and especially means that we are once again filled with expectation over toward all things.

The desacralization of the state

From this there follow three major implications for the state.

First, the preaching of the Gospel desacralizes the state. It has received a new Lord. Jesus is now the Lord of lords and the King of kings. The state can no longer see itself as the high point, the consummation of all being, as the spirit comes to complete self-consciousness. It is no longer God on earth.

In the name of this political position, for three hundred years Christians allowed themselves to be thrown to the lions. Their unprecedented tenacity eventually led to victory and gave birth to European history.

This still raises a fundamental question. The emergence of a dictatorship and an absolute state cannot be explained in terms of the lust for power by evil men. It is inherent in the nature of the state and the needs of practical life. Human beings inevitably seem to think that the problems of society can be solved by the state in an absolute manner.

There is but one guarantee against this unhealthy perversion of the meaning of the state: the Old and New Testament witness about God, Christian faith in Jesus Christ.

This desacralization of the state, and this is our second point, came to formal expression: that the preaching of the Gospel created a church alongside the state, so that life was lived in this fundamental duality. The throne and the altar do not spring from a single root because in Christianity the altar was added from outside, that is from Israel. The church doesn't stand under the state but complete beside it on the same level and with a wholly different authority of equal value. This duality of church and state gave European life its unique suspense and drama. It would be nothing less than a disaster for humanity if this duality were to be eliminated in the future.

This leads us to our third point. God in Christ gives us all we need. In a certain sense, he pushes things to their end. But he also waits for us until we inwardly affirm and accept what he gives us. He does everything in the way of the Holy Spirit, that is, in the way of freedom. Politically, this freedom is now anchored in the desacralization of the state and in the duality of church and state.

In our time this raises an essential question. What is at issue in life is the good. But when we think we know the good, may we impose it on people by force? Democracy, as the form of political society in the West, says No, for the people must first begin to see that the good really is the good. It must be inwardly affirmed and accepted. Communism therefore says, with some justification, that democracy is reactionary, for it does contain a deterrent, a restraint. We do not resort to the absolute power of an absolute state to impose an absolute good on human life. We wait for the people to develop insight. Life is enfolded in the mystery of love.

This freedom – along with all its enormous problems – is also an essential part of the fulfilment that comes with the coming of Christ. This coming does not solve all our problems; it just poses them in the right way. Their resolution once again lies before us – in the future, in history and in the last judgment. God and mankind are still busy working at it.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

From: Blij zijn als Kinderen: een boek voor volwassenen, *A.A. van Ruler, J.H. Kok b.v. Kampen. Translation by Harry der Nederlanden*

Opinion

Mainly on Money

No more bucks, no more Powell

I am still in the US of A and have succumbed to one of my addictions: I have bought 6 books in the past week, thanks to the high Canadian dollar. One of them "Running on Empty" was listed for $24.00 US or $36 Can. With our dollar floating around $1.20 this saved me more than $6.00 on this book alone. The book itself, written by a prominent Republican, a former secretary of Commerce, is subtitled "How the Democratic and the Republican Parties are bankrupting our future and what Americans can do about it."

I think Mr. Peter Peterson, the author, had hoped for a switch at the White House: "The shocking surprise of the George W. Bush presidency is not just the absence of any serious effort to confront the entitlement cost challenge, but the largest benefit expansion by far since the glory days of Presidents Johnson and Nixon."

This businessman has little use for politicians. He quotes Lillian Hellman: "A politician is an acrobat. He keeps his balance by saying the opposite of what he does." Also H.L.Mencken: "A politician is an animal which can sit on the fence and yet keep both ears to the ground."

Will the USA "build a society based on thrift, stewardship and justice between generations," the last sentence of this book? No. Will Washington deal with the ultimate $72 trillion shortfall in Social Security, Medicaid and other deficits, about twice the net worth of all of America? No. Does that mean that the States will go Bankrupt? Yes.

Here's why

Within his party, Bush has three different constituencies: the Christian Right, Big Business, and the Militarists. The Christian Right is not primarily interested in money matters. Its concern is gay marriage and abortion. For gay marriage they'll go after a constitutional amendment. To outlaw abortion the Supreme Court has to undo the decision called Roe v. Wade, which needs new appointments to the Supreme Court so that there can be a 5-4 vote for a reversal. Now three justices are ready to vote that way, but one of them is about to retire. They'll push Bush to appoint three justices committed to overturning Roe v. Wade.

Bush will go along with the Christian right, as long as it doesn't interfere with his economic aims, more important to him and his big business constituency. These economic conservatives want to shift the taxation burden from the rich to the non-rich. They want lower tax rates for the top categories, end taxes on dividends, and, what will completely torpedo Peterson's proposals, will call for reforms of social security and medical insurance, to be able to have people opt out of the social security program via so-called individual accounts. This would remove younger, better-off persons from being contributors to the fund that now serves to pay the retirement accounts. Further down the line they want to eliminate social security altogether. Government income would then solely rely on either a flat tax or a national sales tax, both taxing the poor and middle class the most.

All this is exactly the opposite of what Peterson in "Running on Empty" recommends.

And the nominal opposition, the Democrats? If history is any guide, they'll make matters worse. So, that leaves only people like Peterson, responsible persons in business and finance who are worrying about a meltdown of the dollar and a monstrous government debt growing by leaps and bounds. They want the U.S. government to cut its costs. The only place to do this is in the military budget, which brings us to the third constituency, the militarists (including the neo-cons).

The militarists want to go back to the days when the United States was the unquestioned power in the world, people like Wolfowitz and Perle, who took top place in the first Bush administration, leading to the Iraq fiasco. These so-called neo-cons are now more and more running into trouble at home with the centrist forces, who are bemoaning the folly and the economic cost of the invasion. These civilian militarists are unrepentant and now want to invade Iran, teaming up with Israel. But business is deadset against the financial drain of the wars, preventing the economic changes they want. So within these three Republican streams there is a lot of discord. The only matter they are united upon is a total disregard for matters environmental.

And then there are the foreigners who have financed all this folly to the tune of trillions. They are becoming edgy, of course, as they see their investments shrink dramatically, adding to the confusion and risk.

The net result is ever more division, both within the Bush camp and the world at large, setting the stage for universal upheaval. Poor Bush could, in his second term, well experience a perfect storm of political turmoil at home, ever more hostility abroad, mounting debts, growing inflation and rising energy prices.

Want to make some money? Sell the USA dollar short. Buy gold and shares in Canadian resources, such as oil.

Something quite different

Long live 'Yes Sir,' and the deferential band of the faithful being assembled as the new Washington cabinet. It seems that the only condition for being a 'minister' there is the ability to chant in unison 'Yes Sir' to the president. Only those that do are admitted to participate in Bush's shocking Second Coming.

That's why Powell is gone, and the rising star in the our world order is Condoleezza Rice. Colin Powell, careful to the extreme and loyal to a fault, did not say "Yes Sir" enough to keep him in his job. And the world mourns. We now have a new shining light, who once told America, "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," referring to a slew of aluminum pipes sighted in Iraq prior to the invasion, supposedly auguring the End of the World as we know it.

That may now be true after all, but for different reasons. With Ms. Rice in charge, that famous super woman, former provost of Stanford University, an expert on Soviet and East European affairs, an accomplished pianist, ice skater and tennis player, and George W. Bush's tutor on foreign policy, Bush expects to see miracles happening.

Is she really that good? As security advisor she was supposed to be the filter through which an awful lot of mangled and misshapen intelligence would make its way to the president and the American people. She either believed the nonsense she was spouting about mushroom clouds, or she deliberately misled her president and the nation on matters that would eventually lead to the deaths of tens of thousands.

Secretary Powell's close friend and deputy at the State Department, Richard Armitage, viewed Ms. Rice's operation with contempt. In his book "Plan of Attack," Bob Woodward said Mr. Armitage "believed that the foreign-policy-making system that was supposed to be coordinated by Rice was essentially dysfunctional." The president once before banked on her so-called expertise. In October 2003, Mr. Bush, frustrated by setbacks in Iraq, put Ms. Rice in charge of his Iraq Stabilization Group, responsible to quell the violence and begin the reconstruction in Iraq.

Well, one year later, matters have not improved, have they? It'll be destroyed in order to save it. I am afraid that history will show that the Bush crowd of yes-nodders brought tremendous amounts of suffering to enormous numbers of people. The streams of blood being shed is sickening, and there is no end to the grief in sight.

Law and order Republicans, so keen to indict Clinton, changed the rules, now that Tom DeLay is threatened with indictment. Tom DeLay, the majority leader, who wants to despoil the 19 million acres of protected lands in Alaska, not so much for oil – perhaps 6 months of supply – but to teach the despised environmentalists a lesson. Competence no longer counts: only loyalty. No wonder people want to leave the United States.

Expect a lot of applicants from the US for job openings in Canada and abroad. I am thinking of starting a new business. I already have a provisional name for it DARC: Disaffected Americans Relocation Centre. And a slogan" Go through DARC to see Light again in Canada." Just as thousands of conscientious objectors fled to Canada during the Vietnam War, so now we'll see lots of refugees flocking to foreign shores. Not the kind that need to be smuggled at the mercy of unscrupulous operators, but sophisticated folk in Volvos and vans, with degrees and long curricula vitae, polished and affluent. They will be drawn to liberal Canada not only because seven provinces have approved gay marriage, because marijuana will be legal, because so-called religion will not distort freedom, because Kyoto is alive and well. They will also come here in droves because the economic situation in the USA is so precarious. They might as well get out while the going is good, while real estate assets still have value, while the American Dollar still has some buying power left.

So, Canada, let's welcome them with open arms. We need these poli-eco-refugees, hardworking, law abiding, entrepeunerial ladies and gentlemen. They will thrive in our country, as have the thousands of draft dodgers decades ago. Already our Immigration Department, usually receiving some 20,000 hits each day, has seen its score jump to 120,000. Come on in Yanks. Leave home. Escape while you can.

Bert Hielema lives in Tweed, Ont. His website has been updated, now including all past columns as well as other writings:
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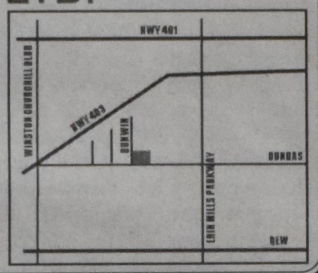

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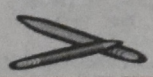

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Classifieds

Birthday

90th Birthday December 9, 2004

Grace Geertsma (nee **Tiersma**)

We would like to invite you to an **Open House** on Sat. Dec. 11, 2004 from 2 - 4 p.m. at the Lucknow Christian Reformed Church.

Happy birthday from all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
May God bless you on this day with peace and joy.
May you have many more days and years with your loved ones.

Address: 550 Montgomery Lane Apt 2
RR#3 Lucknow ON N0G 2H0

For Sale

HAMMOND THEATRE ORGAN
4000 Series. 25 note pedal board, 52 stops. Beautiful condition. $1500. Phone **1-613-966-0388**

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Largo, Florida Due to illness – For rent 2 bedroom 2 bathroom **mobile home** $1000 US/mo. Available Dec. 1 to Feb. 28. Non-smokers please. For more details, call **705-733-8193**

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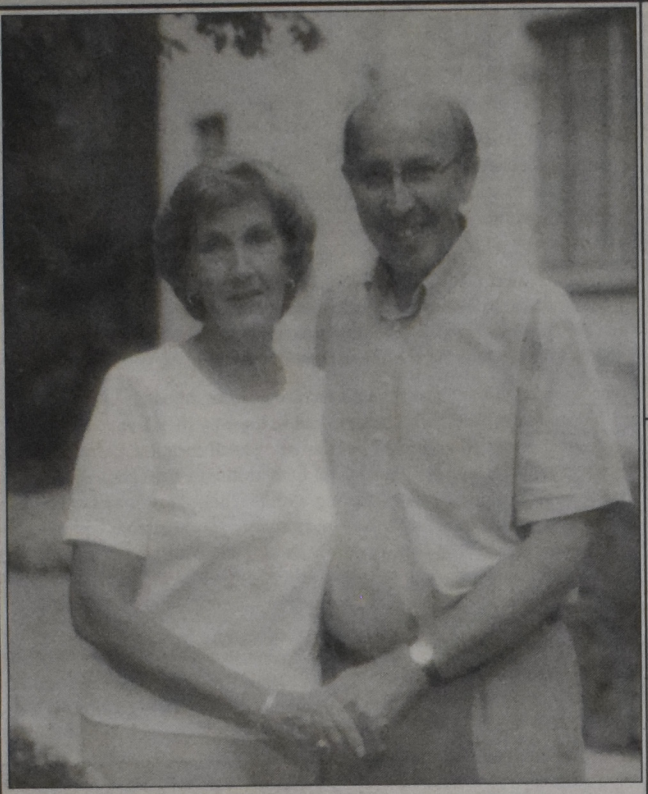
An elegant air conditioned private entrance suite with 900 sq. ft. of personal space. Includes a private 3 pce. bath, personal kitchenette, queen size bed & cots, large entertainment room with gas fireplace. Join us for an evening visit or a served breakfast in our dining room at 8:30 a.m. Centrally located in SW Ontario near London. Ideal for tourists, travellers or vacationers in the area, easy access to main highways and numerous tourist attractions. Reduced rates for a Multi-Night stay. We look forward to greeting you!

Nico & Alice Jukema,
PH:519-485-2101
Fax: 519-485-2103
email: jukema@lilbitcountry.ca
web: www.lilbitcountry.ca

Anniversary



1955 – Brockville, ON January 8 2005 – Mississauga, ON

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Prov. 3:6

With thanksgiving to God for his faithfulness,
we celebrate the **50th Wedding Anniversary** of our parents and grandparents

FRED AND JANE REINDERS *(nee* **Van der Wey***)*

We are grateful for their love, blessed by their Christian example, and delighted in their 50 years of commitment.

Michael and Colleen Reinders, *Oakville, ON*
Alicia, Renee, Joel and Matt
Karen and Robb Powell, *Millgrove, ON*
David, Jordan, Luke, Sarah and Elise
Hilda and Robert Balamut, *Burlington, ON*
Daniel, Stephen, Leanne, Benjamin
Phil and Betty Reinders, *Calgary, AB*
Owen
Harold and Sharon Reinders, *Oakville, ON*
Joshua, Lucas, Philip

An **Open House** will be held on Saturday January 8, 2005 from 2 - 5 p.m. at the Maple-Reinders building, 2660 Argentia Road, Mississauga, ON (*Best wishes only, please*).

Home address: 1655 Valentine Gardens, Mississauga ON L5J 1H4.

1954 December 23 2004

With thanksgiving and praise to the Lord for his faithfulness and goodness, we announce the
50th Wedding Anniversary
of our parents and grandparents

ALBERT AND NELL LAMMERS
(nee **Voskamp**)

With love and with thanks to you from your children and grandchildren:

Rick & Sharon Lammers, *Langley BC*
Melissa, David, John, Rachel
Pete & Janet Lammers, *Wooler ON*
Christopher, Michael, Matthew, Michelle
John & Darlene Lammers, *Cobourg ON*
Brittney, Marni
Diane & Harold Westerman, *Courtice, ON*
Allan, John, Brenda, Derek, Deanna
Henry & Yvonne Lammers, *London ON*
Amber, Eric, Jolene, Benjamin, Bear
Eric & Lisa Lammers, *London ON*
Joshua, Matthew, Janelle

Home address: 1 Thomas St
Cobourg ON K9A 1J9

Obituaries

Odoorn, Drente Prescott, Ontario
January 31, 1912 November 15, 2004

The Lord took unto himself our dear mother, grandmother and great-grandmother

LUMMECHIENA GEERTRUIDA BOSMA (nee **Ottens**)

in her 93rd year.

Grace & Jacob Rook, *Cobden*
Gwenneth Bosma, *Brinston*
Theresa & Glenn Lapier, *Brinston*
Bea & Lucas van Beilen, *Brinston*
Also survived by 7 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren.
Predeceased by husband Abraham (1973) and son Egbert (2002).

Funeral service was held at Iroquois, Rev. C. Witten officiating.

CORNELIS KOOGER

Sassenheim Lindsay
Noord Holland Ontario
The Netherlands Canada
September 7, 1928 November 16, 2004

Psalm 103:11-18

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children –
with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

The Lord took home our father, grandfather and great-grandfather, **Cor Kooger**, after a long illness.

Lovingly remembered by:
Pieter & Martha Kooger, *Lindsay, ON*
Rebecca & Dale Rudkowski, Carole Scheerschmidt,
Jennifer Banack, Michael;
Marilyn & Ralph Bell, *Edmonton, AB*
Kim, Karen & Darrell Huibers, Kevin & Chainie
Frank Kooger and Elly Kooger, *Surrey, BC*
Joel, Erin, Arlynn, Kyle
John & Joan Kooger, *Cameron, ON*
Melissa, Ryan, Caitlin
Laura & Darrel Feucht, *Inwood, IA*
Kristi, Jeffrey, Steven, Daniel
Charles & Marcia Kooger, *Regina, SK*
Cari, Tatiana Kooger and Chris John, Peter, David, Cintia
Joyce & Rick Triemstra, *Surrey, BC*
Marjy, Melanie, Julia, David, Bethany, Lindsey;
Gwendolyn & Kevin Gesch, *Oostburg, WI*
Karolyn & Ben Doss, Martina, Erika, Laura, William, Karl
Roger & Jolette Kooger, *Edmonton, AB*
Anika, Vinette, Heidi
and 11 great-grandchildren
Candace, Alysha, Sarah, Jaden, Sydney, Abigayle, Jamie, Quinten, Maximus, Samantha, Jaheim.
Also surviving are three brothers and three sisters.

Preceeded in death by his beloved wife of 50 years, Marjorie (Map) Kooger, his parents and one sister.

Correspondence: 3 Pottinger St
Lindsay ON K9V 3X2

Memorials may be directed to the CRWRC.

Assen Aug. 2, 1922 – Nov. 13, 2004 Lindsay

Called to be with his Heavenly Father

KOERT SCHOLTEN

in his 83rd year.

Loved husband of Grace Scholten-Dik.
Loved father of:
4 children and their spouses
5 grandchildren & 6 great-grandchildren.

Correspondence: 35 Angeline St #507
Lindsay ON K9V 5A6

Psalm 42:1 *As the deer longs for the water, So my soul longs for you, O God.*

Feb. 21, 1913 Nov. 8, 2004
Blija, Friesland Brampton, Ontario

WIETSKE (Winda) SMALLEGANGE-BROERSMA (nee **Vander Schaaf**)

went home to be with her Lord & Savior.

Loving mother of:
Andy & Joyce, *Minden*
Harvey & Sita, *Bowmanville*
Len & Marie, *Oshawa*
Winda & Peter Vandyke, *Kingston*
Peter & Vivian, *North York*
18 grandchildren, 37 great-grandchildren
1 great-great-grandchild

Lovingly remembered by the
Smallegange family:
Linda & Rick
John & Anna
Tom & Mary
Riet & Piet
Martin & Eileen
Wilma
Kathy & Murray
Frank & Fia
Joe & Laura
27 grandchildren, 37 great-grandchildren

Predeceased by husbands:
Poppe (Peter) Broersma (1970)
Geert Smallegange (1984)
Children: Albert Smallegange
Theo Smallegange
2 brothers & 2 sisters in Friesland

Survived by family in Friesland:
Tj. v.d.Schaaf, J. Braaksma
U & C v.d.Schaaf

We thank and praise God for his love and his faithfulness.

Correspondence: H & S Broersma
34 Nelson Street W
Bowmanville ON L1C 1E3

HENNY DRONKELAAR (nee **Slomp**)

It is with gentle relief and great sadness that the family announces the passing of **Henny Dronkelaar** of Picture Butte, AB, beloved wife of Henry Dronkelaar. Henny went to be with her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on Monday November 15, 2004 at the age of 73 years.

She will be dearly missed by her husband Henry, and children Art (Joyce) Dronkelaar: Kurtis, Jocelyn, Carmen, Candace; Lucy (Delbert) Kooy: Danielle, Joni, Kaitlyn, Nathan; Pat (Don) Groot: Michael, Aaron; John Dronkelaar (Colleen); and Allan (Melissa) Dronkelaar: Mikala, Spencer, Hunter, Connor. She is also survived by her brothers and sister: Jenny (Evert) Borkent, John (Agnes) Slomp, Henry (Willemien) Slomp, sister-in-law Gepke Slomp and numerous nieces and nephews. She was pre-deceased by her sister Grace (Henry) Deunk and brother Tim Slomp.

Henny was born January 20, 1931 to Jan and Lammigje Slomp in Drente Holland. She immigrated with her family to the Iron Springs area in 1948. Henny and Henry were married on November 16, 1955 and farmed there for 37 years before retiring to their home in Picture Butte. Henny was a fun-loving and caring person who was always willing to lend a helping hand to her family, her church, her friends and those in need.

The Memorial Service was held at the Iron Springs Christian Ref. Church at 2:00 p.m. with Rev. Andrew Joosse officiating and a reception followed. The interment was held at the Iron Springs Cemetery.

Job Opportunities /Classifieds

Ministry

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CAMPUS MINISTRY
in **Halifax** is seeking applications for the position of
chaplain at Dalhousie University.
The ideal candidate will have a graduate degree and experience in engaging contemporary culture from a Reformed theological perspective.
For more information, jobdescription and profile please contact
Pastor Paul Vanderkooy
29 Hardwoodlands Road,
Milford, Nova Scotia B0N 1Y0 pvkooy@ns.sympatico.ca

BRAMPTON SECOND
CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
situated in the Greater Toronto Area, is in search of a **ministry team** to provide leadership in the following key areas as identified through our congregational visioning process:

- Dynamic preaching, mentoring, training and development
- Providing relational and mentored ministries to give our youth a sense of belonging
- Equipping members to provide spiritual, emotional and physical support through pastoral care
- Enthusiastic worship
- Educating all age groups and challenging members toward deepened spiritual vitality and understanding, effective ministry and greater fellowship
- Administration which enables all team members to communicate and coordinate effectively

Individuals qualified in one or more of the above areas are invited to submit their resume to **office@bramptonsecondcrc.com**
(website: www.bramptonsecondcrc.com).

Education Job Opportunities

GEORGETOWN DISTRICT CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

is seeking applications for an **ADMINISTRATOR** to begin in August 2005. GDCS currently serves 205 students from pre-school through Grade 8. It is a fully interdenominational school, operated by the Georgetown District Christian School Society, and is a member of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools. GDCS is located in the heart of beautiful Halton Hills. Applications will be accepted until January 3, 2005. Please forward your application or inquiries to:

Wilma Grin
13106 22nd Sideroad RR#1
Georgetown Ontario L7G 4S4
Ph: 905-877-8180 Website: www.gdcs.org

CALVIN CHRISTIAN COLLEGIATE

is seeking applicants for a possible **full-time, term, Bible teaching position** for 10 to 20 weeks in the second semester of the 2004-2005 school year (beginning in February). Applicants should be able to articulate a personal statement of Christian belief and must be able to certify as a teacher in Manitoba or acquire a provisional certificate.

Please call for more information or send a resume and cover letter to:
Mr. D. Taylor, Principal,
Calvin Christian Collegiate
706 Day St, Winnipeg MB R2C 1B6
Ph. (204) 222-7910 Fax: 222-8511
The closing date for this position is December 15, 2004.
We sincerely appreciate all applications, however, only those shortlisted will be contacted.

JOHN KNOX CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

The Board of Directors invites applications for the position of

PRINCIPAL

For 45 years John Knox Christian School has been dedicated to equip children for service in God's world through a Christ-centered education. Serving the Mississauga and Oakville community, we are a dynamic elementary school whose 365 students and their teachers reflect diversity – both culturally and denominationally. Our parent volunteers passionately support the mission and operations of the school. We are blessed with an excellent facility and have eatablished programs in the Arts, Library, Computers, Physical Education and Athletics, as well as for Special needs children.

Our committed faculty of 30 work collaboratively in the JK to Grade 6 areas together with our Curriculum Coordinators to develop our academic programmes. As a member of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools, we are committed to the professional development or our staff who have an average of 8 years of service at JKCS. We are looking for a new Principal to carry on this tradition and provide leadership for the future.

The successful candidate should have the following characteristics:

- a personal faith which is evident in the way they live
- recognizes the Lordship of Christ over all creation including education
- a genuine love for students and the ability to listen empathetically
- strong people skills in dealing with teachers, staff, parents and community
- experience as an organised and capable administrator with good judgment
- a visionary who sees possibilities and empowers people to achieve them

Interested applicants who have or are working towards their Christian School Principal's Certificate should submit their resume along with a statement describing their philosophy of Christian Education by January 7, 2005 to:

Laurie Atkins, Board Chair
John Knox Christian School
2232 Sheridan Garden Drive, Oakville ON L6J 7T1
tel: 905-829-8048 fax: 905 829-6056
e-mail: **latkins@jkcs-oakville.org** Website: www.jkcs-oakville.org

BULKLEY VALLEY CHRISTIAN SCHOOL,

a school of 400 students located in the scenic Bulkley Valley of B.C., invites applications for a **principal** at its elementary campus, effective August 1, 2005 (position involves some teaching time). This campus has approximately 175 students from K-6. Bulkley Valley Christian is a school rooted in the reformed tradition, but contains a diverse denominational mix. Applications and inquiries for this position can be forwarded to:

Attn: Irene Bakker,
Board of Directors Chair
Bulkley Valley Christian School
PO Box 2117
Smithers BC V0J 2N0
Phone: **250-847-9833** Fax: 250-847-0184
Email: **bvcselem@telus.net**

FULL-TIME SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Trenton Christian School - Trenton, a multi-denominational school is seeking a vibrant visionary for Administrator, commencing August 2005. TCS is a CHI accredited school serving JK - Grade 8 which includes 246 students from 126 families and a faculty of 19. Qualified individuals should send their resumes, along with their philosophy of Christian Education by January 7 to:

Rob DeVries, Board Chair
Trenton Christian School
340 Second Dug Hill Rd, RR #4
Trenton ON K8V 5P7
Email - tcs@reach.net
Website - www.reach.net/~tcs

TABER CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

is advertising for an **ADMINISTRATOR** for the 2005-2006 school year.
Taber Christian School located in Southern Alberta, is a well-established interdenominational school with 144 students in Kindergarten to Grade 9. Taber Christian School is operated by the Society of Christian Education of Southern Alberta. The administrator will work co-operatively with the administrators from Immanuel Christian Elementary School and Immanuel Christian High School.
Applications will be accepted until January 07,2005.
Please direct inquiries or applications to:

Marilyn Visser
4809 – 60 Avenue, Taber AB T1G 1E9
ph: 403-223-4550 Fax: 403-223-4693
taberchristian@shaw.ca

Please call 1-819-684-3959
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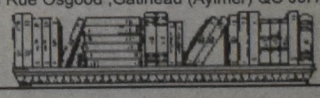
28 Rue Osgood ,Gatineau (Aylmer) QC J9H 1R7



Wishing you a blessed Christmas

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Job Opportunities/Advertising

REDEEMER University College

Redeemer University College invites applications for tenure-track positions, beginning in July 2005, in the following departments:

Department of Physical Education
Candidates must be specialists in the Social Science area of Physical Education and Kinesiology. The successful candidate will be prepared to teach in some or all of the following areas: Sport Psychology, Sport Sociology, Coaching, Motor Learning, Adapted Physical Education, Recreation Management, and Instructional Methods for Physical Activities. Teaching physical activity classes is a possibility. Expertise in leadership and administration is an asset

Department Of Business
Candidates must have expertise in marketing. The ability to teach courses in human resources, information technology, and/or general business would be an asset.

Department Of Sociology/Social Work
Applicants must demonstrate teaching expertise in three of the following areas: cultural diversity, social policy, micro/macro-practice, and social justice. Applicants must also have a strong record of community service and a strong commitment to social work education and practice.

As a liberal arts and sciences university college rooted in the Reformed tradition of Christianity, we seek candidates who are committed to teaching and pursuing scholarship from this perspective. Applicants should possess, or be near completion of, a Ph.D. Interested applicants should submit a curriculum vitae, three letters of reference, and a one-page or two-page statement describing their own faith commitment and how it shapes their academic work. The deadline for applications is **January 15, 2005** or until the positions are filled.

Part-time Instructor in Dutch: Redeemer University College requires an Instructor to teach one or two sections of beginning Dutch for the 2005-06 academic year. The course introduces university students to both conversational and written Dutch, and includes instruction in grammar. Minimum M.A. is preferred; teaching experience at the senior secondary or university level is required. Please send a curriculum vitae and letter of application to Dr. Jacob P. Ellens at the address below.

Direct general inquiries and applications to:
Dr. Jacob P. Ellens, Vice-President (Academic)
Redeemer University College
777 Garner Road East
Ancaster, ON L9K 1J4 Canada
jellens@redeemer.on.ca. **www.redeemer.on.ca**

Redeemer University College offers equal employment opportunities to qualified applicants. In accordance with Canadian Immigration requirements, Canadian citizens and permanent residents will be considered first for these positions.

ABBOTSFORD CHRISTIAN SCHOOL JOB POSTINGS

Abbotsford Christian School, located in the Fraser Valley, is a well established, interdenominational school of 1000 students in three campuses: Elementary (pre K – grade 5), Middle (6 – 8) and Secondary (9 – 12). We are inviting applications for the following positions:

SUPERINTENDENT
This is a new position at ACS. The successful applicant will be the chief administrator of the school system and be directly responsible to the Board of Directors. This person will be:
- a mature, committed Christian with proven leadership abilities
- a leader with a strong vision for Christian education who is able to respond to current educational trends and apply them in light of the biblical perspective at ACS
- a visionary who can provide leadership in strategic planning and implement such plans
- a team player who will motivate, encourage, challenge, hold accountable and empower the principals and other senior administrators
- an articulate spokesperson for ACS

POSSIBLE OPENING FOR A SECONDARY PRINCIPAL
This person will be an experienced, qualified and enthusiastic leader who is deeply committed to Christian education and is excited about working as part of a leadership team.
Application deadline: JANUARY 5, 2005

All positions commence August 2005. Applicants must be eligible for a valid BC College of Teacher's Certificate and meet the requirements of the ACS Employment Contract.

Please send resume, statement of faith, philosophy of Christian Education and credentials to:

SEARCH COMMITTEE, Abbotsford Christian School
35011 Old Clayburn Road, Abbotsford BC V2S 7L7

ACS

Contact: Sharon Vandenberg, Board Chair, at 604-820-0463, email: esvan@telus.net

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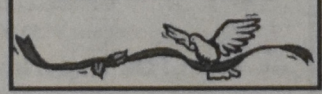
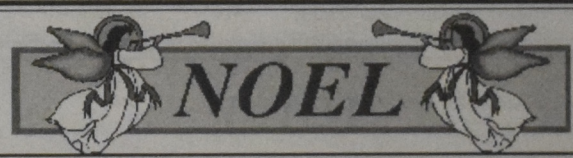


Greetings of the Season and Best wishes for the New Year

GARY VAN EYK, CMA
50 Lakeport Rd., Suite 201
St. Catharines, ON L2N 4P7
Ph: 905-646-7331

GVE



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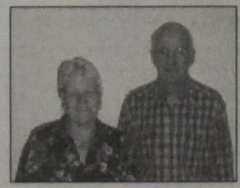

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"Lord, You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" – Psalm 90:1

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Tel. (905) 648-2131 Fax (905) 648-2134
www.redeemer.on.ca stewardship@redeemer.on.ca

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec 3 & 4 Redeemer Concert & Alumni Choirs present two performances of Handel's "Messiah". 8pm Dec. 3 at Redeemer and Dec. 4 at Centenary United Church 24 Main St. W in Hamilton. Box Office 1-877-779-0913

Dec 12 Christmas Concert by **St. Thomas Crescendo Male Choir** 7:30 p.m. **Knox** Presbyterian Church, 55 Hincks Street, **St. Thomas** (Free will offering) Info: (519) 637-4357

Dec 19 Christmas Concert by **St. Thomas Crescendo Male Choir** 7:30 p.m. **Knox** Presbyterian Church, 9 Victoria Street North, **Goderich.** Info: (519) 637-4357

Dec 19 Heritage Service, 2 p.m Theme "Hoe zal ik U ontvangen?" at the Zion CRC Adelaide East and Central Park, **Oshawa**. Pastor John Veenstra, Mr. Jim Hoogsteen, organist.

2005

Apr 9 Concert of Sacred Music by **St. Thomas Crescendo Male Choir** 7:30 p.m. **Bethel** CRC, 716 Classic Drive, **London** (Free will offering) Info: (519) 637-4357

May 1 Concert of Sacred Music by **St. Thomas Crescendo Male Choir** 7:30 p.m. **Knox** Presbyterian Church, 55 Hincks Street, **St. Thomas** (Free will offering) Info: (519) 637-4357

May 7 Liberation Choir 60th Anniversary Concert, with the Guelph Symphony Orchestra, 7:30 at **Hamilton** Place. Tickets: $20, $30, $40. Available from choir members/ box office/ www.organs.ca

May Jesus continue to be the reason for your Christmas Season and a Happy-Healthy New year.

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Advantage Meadowvale Travel
2283 Argentia Rd, Unit 9B,
Mississauga, ON L5N 5Z2

Tel: 905 - 826 - 4141; toll free 1 - 800 - 755 - 0367
Fax: 905 - 858 - 1704
e-mail: **jklomps@istar.ca**

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Events/Advertising

The residents of Shalom Manor,
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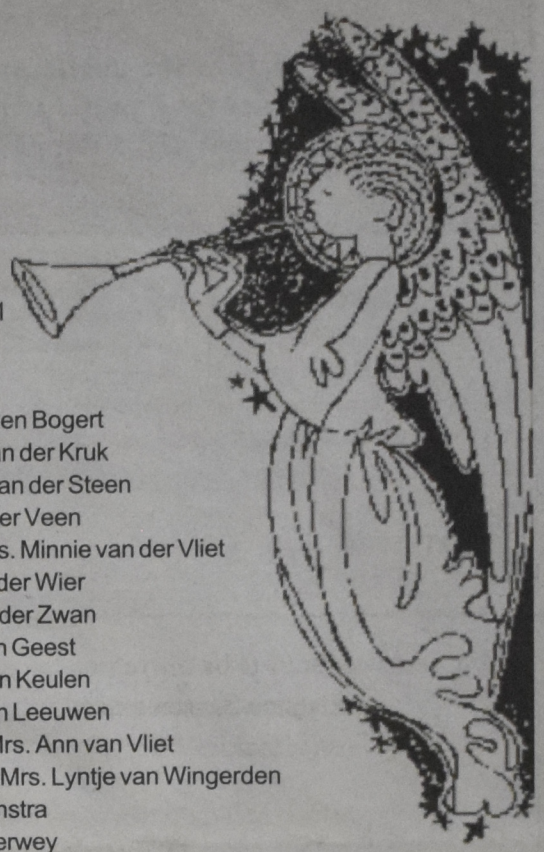
convey to their loved ones and friends,
their best wishes in this Christmas Season and for the New Year 2005.

*Those who hope in the **LORD***
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles:
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 40:31



The following **Residents of Shalom Manor** have requested that their names be included in the **2004 Christmas Greetings** edition of *Christian Courier.*

Mrs. Hendrika Bezuyen
Mrs. Aaltje Breukelman
Mrs. Nel Broerse
Mrs. Aleida Buesink
Mrs. Tina Buitenwerf
Mrs. Liesbeth Colenbrander
Mr. Adrianus Dekker
Mrs. Wilhelmina Dekker
Mr. Arthur & Mrs. Susan de Boer
Mrs. Aafje de Raaf
Mrs. Lois de Vries
Mr. Jacob & Mrs. Renskje de Vries
Mrs. Trijntje de Witte
Mrs. Alice Elgersma
Mr. Peter Ellens
Mrs. Theresa Guther
Mrs. Margje Hagen
Mr. Peter Hamming
Mrs. Fenna Hemrica
Mr. Ben Hofland
Ms. Rany Hofland
Mr. Jacob Hoogerbrugge
Mrs. Aaltje Jongejan
Mr. Ed and Mrs. Lucy Jorritsma
Mr. Andries Kok
Mrs. Helen Lootsma
Mr. James & Mrs. Wilma Lycklama
Mrs. Jacqueline Noordzij
Mr. George & Mrs. Anneke Plantinga
Mrs. Jane Potstra
Mr. Johannes & Mrs. Maria Proper
Mr. Andries & Mrs. Maaike Rijnberk
Mr. Clarence Rowaan
Mr. Gary Schipper
Mrs. Christine Sjaarda
Mrs. Martha Snip
Mrs. Janke (Jane) Soldaat
Mrs. Anne Tigchelaar
Mrs. Minnie Timmer
Mrs. Cornelia van Dyk
Mrs. Mary van Dyk
Mrs. Adriana van Tuyl
Mr. Cornelius & Mrs. Trudy Vandenberg
Mr. Jacob & Mrs. Nellie van den Berg
Mrs. Riek van den Bogert
Mrs. Pauline van der Kruk
Mrs. Cornelia van der Steen
Mrs. Tine van der Veen
Mr. Arthur & Mrs. Minnie van der Vliet
Mrs. Hilda van der Wier
Mrs. Maria van der Zwan
Mrs. Magda van Geest
Mr. Ysbrand van Keulen
Mrs. Martha van Leeuwen
Mr. William & Mrs. Ann van Vliet
Mr. Bastiaan & Mrs. Lyntje van Wingerden
Mrs. Anne Veenstra
Mrs. Meinsje Verwey
Mr. Peter Vink
Mrs. Trudy Visser
Mrs. Pietje (Pat) Wybenga
Mrs. Margaret Zantingh-Ouwehand
Mrs. Aukien Zeyl

Joy to the World The Lord is Come!

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:1

Christmas Greetings from
Holland Christian Homes
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These residents of Holland Christian Homes offer their greetings for a blessed and happy Christmas and New Year to family, friends, and neighbors.

Peter & Jenny Hensen..... HT 502
Mien Staring .....HT 715
T. Baker .....HT 410
Harry & Betty Roffel .....TT 516
Elze VanHemert .....PT 805
Truus de Bruyn .....HT 707
De TenHaaf .....HT 505
Harry Mulder .....HT 306
Dan and Henny Euser .....CT 609
Ann & Zwier Adriaanse..... HT 512
Clarence & Sya Dykstra .....PT 703
Grace Slickers.....TT 408
Teny DenOtter .....PT 305
Wilma Bemer .....CT 501
Dirk & Rie Jongkind .....HT 714
Agnes Talsma .....FM 113
Mrs. Vanhuis .....TT 617
Mr. & Mrs. Bovemberg .....PeT 1206
Mrs. C. VanderWoude .....TT 106
Mrs. T. VanHouten .....HT 705
Mrs. Johanna Beunk .....HT 307
Mr. H. Beintema .....HT 309
Mrs. Femmie Martens .....CT 1201
Mr. & Mrs. W. Braam .....HT 509
Piet Veenstra .....TT 110
Sybrand Koole .....PT 502
Arie & Magda VanZandwyk ....PT 801
Johanna Westerneng .....PT 806
Loum & Willy VanMarrum .....KT 203
Hank & Janny DeWolde .....HT 312
Jack & Minke de Leeuw .....KT 1501
Berend & Tiena Lubberts .....HT 109
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We wish God's blessing to all our friends and supporters through the holiday season and the coming year.

Merry Christmas!

From the National Board and Staff of the Christian Labour Association of Canada

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And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth... *John 1:14a*

May the reality of the Incarnation be the source of your celebration this Christmas!

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